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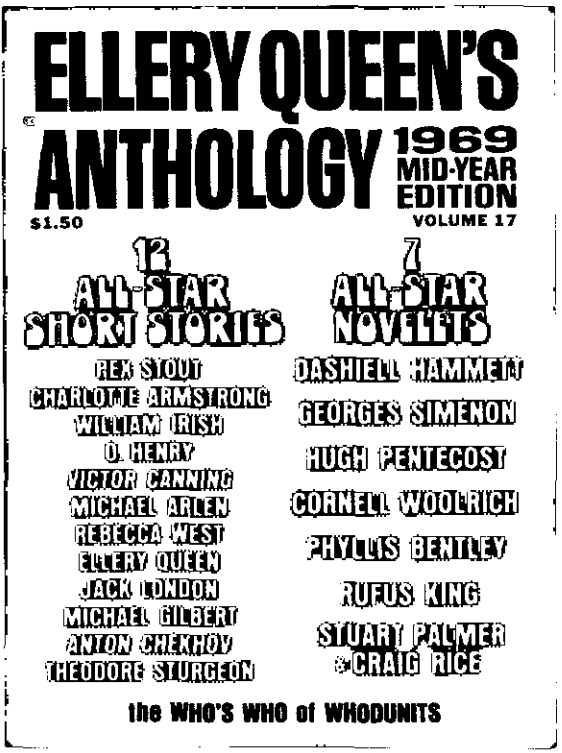

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a *NEW* skiptracing procedural by

JOE GORES

Another fictional semidocumentary detailing the day-to-day, step-by-step procedures of a DKA field agent and of the home office's supplementary skiptracing, written by a man who knows and tells it like it is... Who would think that a simple hunt for a young mother who had failed to keep up her car payments—a simple repo (repossession) case—could generate so much drama and suspense?

FILE #5: THE MARIA NAVARRO CASE

by JOE GORES

TRINIDAD MORALES HAD A BROWN moon-face, clever brown hands, and precise feet in brown oxfords. He was 29 years old, considerably overweight, and had been a field agent with Daniel Kearny Associates of San Francisco for two years. By the coming February, he figured, he would have enough experience to pass the California private investigator's examination and get his own license. Then no more skiptracing, no more embezzlement investigations or repossessions. Divorces, then. Insurance frauds and electronic snooping. The meaty stuff that paid the real dough.

Morales sighed and rolled another snap-out form into the typewriter. After his reports there was a repossessed Mercury to go down to the Florida Street storage lot and then cases to work.

At 9:00 P.M. a key grated in the street door of the basement below DKA's old Victorian building on Golden Gate Avenue. Morales stuck his head out of his cubicle just in time to see a tall well-built, blond man closing the heavy door behind him. Morales small brown eyes lit up. It was Larry Ballard who had been with DKA just over a year and was getting quite a rep as an investi

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gator. Ballard's blue eyes were oddly hard for his 24 years—and yet he was an easy mark when you needed somebody to help with your work.

"Hi, Trin. I didn't know you were here."

"Doing reports." Morales had a heavy, breathy voice as if he were recovering from an asthma attack. He added, with elaborate nonchalance, "Got a minute to run a repo down to Florida Street with me?"

"Sure. And then maybe you could help me with something."

"Jeez, Ballard, I'm really jammed up—"

"It's right near the Florida Street lot. A re-open for Cal-Cit Bank. The subject's skipped and the old Mexican lady in the lower apartment doesn't speak English."

Morales, deciding that Ballard was uptight about something, let his thick lips curve in a grin that showed a glint of gold from one of his broad white teeth. His eyes became almost sly. "As long as we're working *your* cases, Ballard, we might as well take a look at a couple of mine."

The 300 block of Shotwell in San Francisco's Mission district was a row of gingerbready old houses, narrow, flat-roofed, crammed shoulder to shoulder. In the darkness their flaked pastel colors were a uniform mud-gray.

Morales parked in front of a hulking warehouse across the narrow street from 356; glass from the stone-pocked windows crunched under the wheels of his company Ford.

"The subjects are Jose and Maria Navarro," said Ballard over the hum of the two-way radio. "It's a '67 Pontiac Bonneville convertible, license L-S-G-I-5-1. When I worked it before, Navarro had skipped out and Maria had the car. She's got twin daughters about three years old and is trying like hell to raise them up right."

Crossing the litter-strewn street, Morales wondered idly how Ballard would know what kind of mother the subject's wife was. The front steps of 356 had collapsed and had been replaced with bare wood risers. Unpainted two-by-fours had been used as hand railings. Ballard gestured toward the right-hand door, which opened on an inner flight of stairs and was flanked by a brassy new mailbox with no name on it.

"Maria lived up there before."

Morales laid a stubby finger against the left-hand bell. After a few seconds the vestibule light went on and a shuffling Spanish woman appeared. She wore a black shawl and her seamed face was sullen. Morales spouted Spanish at her which contained the name of Maria Navarro. The old woman shrugged.

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"*Antes, si; pero se largo hace un par de meses.*"

"She cut out two months ago," Morales explained to Ballard. He turned back to the old woman with another question. Her answer was a gesture which seemed to suggest the vast reaches into which such patently unsavory women might disappear.

"Ask if Maria had any friends around here," Ballard suggested.

Morales did. The old woman spat a final reply, then slammed the door. The overweight, slightly bow-legged investigator rocked on thoughtful heels; he had heavy shoulders and a solid meaty torso. "She says this Maria broad was a cheap tramp who hung around the neighborhood bars. Sure your little chick ain't been nighthawking?"

"A prostitute? *Maria*?" Ballard shot a murderous look toward the closed door. "Why, that lying old—" He drew a breath, then said in a very different voice, "Hell, Trin, Maria had a job as a domestic over in Pacific Heights."

What gave with Ballard, anyway? Jumpy as a canary at a cat show. Morales started to say that he would snoop around, then remembered that it would mean a lot of work to satisfy a little curiosity; so he merely grunted, "Yeah, well, she's long gone from here. C'mon, Ballard, I got addresses to check on a couple of cases."

On Monday, June 1st, Giselle Marc reviewed the Navarro file as part of her normal office routine, and then began skiptracing on the case. The subjects showed a previous residence on Griffith Street, and Maria had been a domestic for a Mrs. Hosford on Scott Street in the exclusive Pacific Heights area. The husband Jose, who had worked in a warehouse on Market Street, had parents living on Harper Street in Berkeley. Giselle assigned the Berkeley lead to the DKA East Bay office and put a memo carbon of the other information into Larry Ballard's IN box.

She got in touch with the dealer who had originally sold the car and with the credit bureau; then she made a traffic-citation check with the San Francisco police, and ran the subject, his wife, and the car through the California Department of Motor Vehicle files in Sacramento for possible new addresses. No leads developed from this preliminary skiptracing.

By Friday, June 5th, Ballard had turned in only a single report announcing that Jose had been gone from his employment for several months and had been dropped from Warehousemen's Local #860 for nonpayment of dues. Giselle read it, frowned, then scrawled *See me* across the spare report carbon and turned it back to Ballard.

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At 5:30, when the clerical staff had gone home, Larry sauntered in to hook one hip on the edge of Giselle's desk.

"What's the gripe on the Navarro file?"

"*One* report in a week? What about the Shotwell Street address? What about Maria? Last time you worked it she had the car, not Jose."

Ballard said defensively, "Trin Morales and I talked to the old lady who lives downstairs on Shotwell. She didn't know anything."

Giselle leaned back in her chair and tapped her pen on the desk. She was a very bright and very handsome blonde, tall, slender, reserved, about Ballard's age; but three years at DKA had developed the hunter's instinct that all good investigators must possess.

"Morales said the old lady thought Maria was a prostitute."

"She's no prostie!" yelped Ballard. "She—"

Giselle nodded, tapping the file with her pen. "C'mon, Larry give to Mama. Are you playing around with the girl?"

"I'm not and I never was," snapped Ballard. "I don't even know where she is right now. I only wish I did."

"This is a re-open, Larry. When you worked the case two months ago, the girl all of a sudden brought the contract up to date. Did you make her payments?"

Ballard stood up abruptly, and went to the yard-square map of San Francisco which hung on the wall behind Giselle's desk. He kept his back to her, seemingly immersed in the detailed streets.

"What if I did?" he asked without turning around.

"So you'll be looking for a new job if the Great White Father finds out. You know how Dan is, Larry. *No personal involvement. Ever.* Did you think that by not working it you'd make it disappear?"

Ballard sighed, finally returning to the desk. "No. I know she's going to have to pay or lose the car. I just don't want to be the one who takes it away from her. You'd have to meet the girl to understand, Giselle."

"Try me."

"Well, okay. Her husband was a real dead beat, just walked out on the three of them. The twins are absolute dolls. I took the two of them to the park one afternoon while Maria tried to raise the cash for the payments among her friends. She couldn't, so I lent it to her."

"And never asked for it back. So then she lets it get two down and skips again—for whatever reason." Giselle shook her head in wonderment. "Larry Ballard, the knight on a big white horse."

Just then Dan Kearny walked in. He was a square-faced, heavy-jawed man in his forties who

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drove himself and his crew too hard because he didn't know any other way to operate. Now he shot his hard, level gaze from one to the other, sensing the tension in the room like a hunting cat sensing its quarry.

"What's up?" he demanded bluntly.

"Larry and I were just talking about Kathy," said Giselle quickly. Kathy Onoda, the Japanese office manager who had been with DKA ever since the firm had started, had been missing work lately because of illness. "About how run-down she looks."

"She does that," agreed Kearny, put off the scent. He turned to Ballard. "Johnny Dell in Bakersfield needs a few days off, Larry, so I want you to go down there tonight and cover for him. He'll be back a week from Monday—the fifteenth. How's your work load right now?"

"Only one bad one," said Ballard unwillingly. "Maria Navarro."

Kearny's slate-gray eyes narrowed as his mental computer flashed. "That's a re-open for Cal-Cit. Okay, give it to Morales—he worked it with you one night anyway."

It was 6:00 P.M. when Ballard went down the steep narrow stairs from the second-floor clerical layout to the street. Morales was pulling up in a blue Buick Skylark, and Ballard paused to grin at him. He realized how pleased he was at being sent out of town; it resolved his division of loyalties. Morales would find Maria, repo the car, and Ballard could forget all about it. And about Maria.

"I'm going to Bakersfield for a week, Trin, so you're getting that Navarro skip to work."

"Don't do me no favors." Morales pursed thick lips and scratched the side of his nose as he watched Ballard walk off. "Now, why ain't *you* turned her yet, hot-shot?" he muttered under his breath.

Over the week-end Morales had some private business with a certain dancer from a Bush Street topless joint, so it wasn't until Monday that he got around to reworking the Navarro case. At Scott Street he ignored the breath-taking Bay view to learn from Mrs. Hosford that Maria had been a domestic with them for a year, but had been discharged following some anonymous phone warnings about her morals. The Griffith Street address was in the Hunter's Point projects—one of the institutionalized slums the city called low-cost housing—and here Morales spoke with a bountiful black woman who had never heard of the Navarros. Morales checked with the Housing Authority: no forwarding address.

It was still daylight when he parked across from 356 Shotwell

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again. Now the street was crowded with noisy brown and black children. Morales poked his broad nose up against the garage window: the Navarro chick might have stashed the Pontiac there before she skipped. Inside there was a car, all right, but it was a 1956 Ford station wagon with two flat tires and only one headlight.

As Morales stretched a finger toward the old woman's bell he realized that her curtains were gone from the bay windows; through the bare dirty panes he could see that the place was empty. *Que pasa?* Had the old lady skipped, too?

Then he saw that the door to the top stairs was ajar. He slipped inside and cat-footed up the interior stairs to the apartment.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Anybody home?"

"Front room," called an answering voice.

Morales entered a room which reeked of new paint. Two Caucasians about his own age were there, wearing Nehru jackets, peace beads, slacks so tight he could almost count their pocket change, and highly glossed ankle-length boots. Their dark hair was too neat, their eyes were too bright, and the skin over their cheekbones had an odd polished look.

"I'm looking for Maria Navarro," grated Morales, darting his eyes about melodramatically. Fruiters. Soft as mush, easy to push around.

"Do you think we're hiding her under the *molding?*" asked one with an affected simper. "After all, we don't know who *you* are—"

"Private investigator."

"Do you have anything to prove it?"

Morales geared down abruptly. The second man was tougher, older than he looked, probably wore a toupee, and did yoga exercises to keep his girlish figure. He had dark watchful eyes that gave nothing away. Morales knew the look; he had it himself, except that his stemmed from his race. Yeah, this would be the landlord.

"We're looking for the Pontiac —she's two down with the third due this month. She burn you for the rent?"

The landlord shook his head, his lean face clearing. Morales realized that he was wearing a carefully applied cosmetic base. "She was good pay with us until she lost her job. Try the corner grocery store."

"What happened to the old lady downstairs?"

"She died." He suddenly laughed. "Are you looking for her, too?"

"Yeah. She ain't paid for her coffin yet."

Morales walked slowly over to the grocery store. He'd grown up

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here in the Mission District, in one of the Mexican ghettos where the rents were high and the waterpipes leaked and nearly every family was shielding a wetback uncle from Immigration. The store was rich with the smells of chile powder, onion, garlic, bay leaf, and drying strings of red peppers. The food shelves featured *tamales, enchiladas* and *tortillas,* and Morales automatically spoke Spanish to the shopkeeper.

"Old man, do you remember a girl named Maria Navarro?"

"Truly." He had silky white hair and an old-fashioned gunfighter's mustache. The gnarled hands gripping the counter were still strong; many years of field work had gone into them. "Who is it wishes to know?"

"I am her brother. Our mother desires that she come home now."

The old man nodded. "Truly," he said again. "Her man was of a badness—" He spread his hands in a vain attempt to encompass the badness of Jose Navarro. "It is he who caused the end of her employment, with his telephone calls. So she had to turn to the Welfare to live."

Welfare. Dammit. Not even a cop armed with a felony warrant could get into Welfare's files. The old man had gone on, his voice brightening as he talked of Maria Navarro.

"Welfare has found her a job. A very proud girl, that one." Morales, who had turned toward the door, stopped abruptly when the old man added, almost dreamily, "The checks she cashes, they are not in the name of Navarro."

"Then in what name, old one?"

Hidden malice lifted in the voice. "Her unmarried name. Which you know, of course, brother of Maria."

Que caray, thought Morales indignantly as he returned to the Shotwell Street address. That old man had caught on that Morales was not Maria's brother. Her *maiden* name, for Pete's sake. How was he supposed to find that out? The landlord, maybe?

But the landlord was gone. And then Morales saw some junk mail sticking out of the mailbox that had been Maria's. And folded over in the bottom of the box was a letter from Nogales, Arizona, addressed in a pencil scrawl to a name that might have been Maria Escajodo. Worth a try. At least it would give Giselle Marc something to work on.

Like all DKA field agents, Morales carried a heavy case load; so it was not until Thursday, June 11th, that he was able to review the Navarro file with Giselle and ask her to pop Welfare for Maria's work address.

"Okay, I'll make a couple of phone calls."

Giselle dialed the General Assistance office of Social Services

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and asked for Mr. Smith, thus learning there was a Charles Smith who was a field caseworker in Aid to Family with Dependent Children. She then became Miss Simmons of the *Chronicle* to speak with Mr. Charles Smith, asking him about the Social Services "job placement program." There wasn't any, he said, but Social Services had been placing selected Welfare "clients" in a public-library training program on an experimental basis.

Then it was a phone call, as Constance St. John of Social Services, disturbed over a misplaced file, to learn from the public-library personnel office that no Maria Escajodo had been placed with the library. A Maria Escajeda—that was E-s-c-a-j-e-d-a—had been placed, however, and assigned to the Catalogue Section. Giselle called Morales.

The Catalogue Section was at 45 Hyde Street behind the main library building—a cavernous room crowded with females of every age and description except that of the subject. Morales stopped a fresh-faced girl who was passing by with an outsized armload of folders. He knew he had a better chance with her than with the hard-eyed woman who ran the place.

"*Senorita,* I look for Maria," he announced in guttural English.

"Do you mean Maria Escajeda?"

"*Si.*"

"She's working at one of the branches now. Out on Potrero Hill."

On Monday, June 15th, Trinidad Morales parked in front of the 20th Street Medical Building, across from the modernistic-pink branch library sandwiched between two much older private residences. On the previous Thursday, Morales had learned that Maria was off until today because her daughters were ill with the flu. It was against library policy to give out home addresses or phone numbers.

He drummed the steering wheel impatiently; the library would open in a few minutes, at noon. A beer truck pulled up, and its driver began to stack cased cans on a hand cart as a red three-wheeler whipped into the curb behind the truck. The rider was a fortyish woman in a blue jacket, sunglasses, a hairnet, black Frisko jeans, hack boots; she jerked a pack of x-ray negs from the cycle box and clumped into the medical building with them.

A 1967 Pontiac, white with a black convertible top, passed and turned right into Connecticut. License; LSG 151. Driven by a petite Mexican girl. Two minutes later she reappeared, walking briskly toward the library. Her cheap, plain red dress showed the full exciting figure of so many

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Spanish girls; her eyes were huge and dark.

Seeing her, Morales thought, explained a lot about Ballard's handling of the case. Ballard probably had got next to her last time around; which meant that Morales ought to be able to do the same.

He walked around the corner to the Pontiac, got into it with the use of a window pick, and ran his bulky chain of 64 GM master keys on the ignition. Key 19 fit. Then, grinning, Morales relocked the car and went away.

When Maria left work that evening and drove the Pontiac to Linda Alley in the Mission district, where the close-packed houses had an oddly Old World flavor, Morales was close behind. By the time she had found a parking place and walked back to number 74, he was standing in a shadowy vestibule across the alley. Even when Maria's head appeared in the second-floor bay window as she lowered the shades, he still waited. Finally a teen-age Mexican girl emerged. The baby-sitter. Then Morales moved.

The house was white stucco, two apartments. Dead tendrils of ivy clung to the front; the decorative roof over the tiny porch showed missing shingles. The owner had probably kicked off, not leaving much insurance, and his widow had converted the upper floor into a rental unit to make ends meet.

He rang the old ornate brass doorbell for the upper apartment. In a few moments the stairwell light went on and Maria descended.

"Who is it?" she called through the front door.

"From the bank," said Morales pushing inside. "About the car."

He heard her sharp intake of breath. He was only five eight, but her richly waved raven hair barely reached his chin. She began to talk in rapid-fire Spanish, but Morales snapped, "*Hable ingles.*" Being forced to speak English would keep her off balance. He jerked his head. "We'd better go upstairs, huh? You wouldn't want the landlady to know."

Maria's front room was crowded by its couch, overstuffed chair, portable TV, and a single floor lamp. In the old-fashioned phone alcove there was a plaster cast of the Virgin, with a votive candle flickering in front of it. The furniture was the sort usually found in furnished apartments. Through an archway he saw a spotless but makeshift kitchen; the other doors would lead to the bedroom and the bathroom.

Maria sat down on the couch, but Morales remained standing over her. "Any personal junk you wanna take outta the car?"

"Can I not keep it?" Her eyes were very large and liquid and troubled. "I have a job now again, soon I can pay—"

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"I got my orders."

Her eyes flashed defiantly. "Orders! Then here are the keys. I will ride the bus to work from now on."

Morales should have remembered the old shopkeeper's remark about her pride. Well, there were other ways. Moon-face bland, he sat down.

"You know, Maria, all us investigators, we got our little arrangements. Take Welfare, now. They tell me where you're living, I tell them if Jose is sneaking in here on the sly."

Sudden anger darkened her eyes. "I spit upon Jose!" she exclaimed. "It is he who lose me my job with his phone calls."

Morales nodded. "*You* know you spit on him, and *I* know you spit on him, but what will Welfare do when I say he's still living here?"

"But it is false!" she gasped.

"Remember, you swore out a criminal warrant against Jose." Such failure-to-support warrants were a legal prerequisite for all dependent support payments, but she wouldn't know that. It would help convince her that Morales really was working with Social Services. And then he remembered Ballard. Perfect. He leaned forward to nail it down. "And *then*, when I tell 'em about you and Larry Ballard, they'll take your kids away from you."

"No!" Her voice was almost a shriek. Face contorted, she began sobbing out broken Spanish phrases. "*...por favor...no me denuncies ...*"

Yeah, she'd come around. She'd do anything to keep those kids. Very deliberately Morales put one clever brown hand on her knee. She stiffened at his touch, but made no other movement; the hand seemed to mean no more to her than a glob of mud thrown by a passing auto.

"Be nice to me, Maria," he said breathily, "and maybe you'll get to keep your kids."

"My children are asleep in the bedroom. We cannot ..." She used the flat voice of the defeated down all the ages; but there was a defiant gleam in her eyes that Morales was too elated to notice. "Tomorrow night I will get Beatriz to stay with the children."

Morales quit grinning abruptly; by the shaded light of the floor lamp his face became sullen. Finally he nodded.

"Okay, tomorrow night. But I'm still taking the car tonight."

After he had gone, Maria crossed to the phone quickly. Her face was set, but her hands shook slightly as she dialed.

Larry Ballard felt really beat. He had worked flat out in Bakersfield for ten days, and then had driven home. It was after 11:00 P.M. when he parked on Lincoln Way and trudged across

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the street to his two-room apartment which peered from bay windows toward the green reaches of Golden Gate Park. Yawning, he dropped his suitcase just inside the door, crinkled his nose at the musty smell of the apartment, and went to the refrigerator for a beer.

Beat. He kicked off his shoes. Anyway, he'd left Johnny Dell's Bakersfield area in a hell of a lot better shape than he'd found it. It would be nice to relax and read a newspaper again, and even get back to his own cases. He grunted. Such as Maria Navarro. He hoped Morales had found her and got the car. He'd really dug that chick, though he'd never laid a hand on her.

The phone rang.

"To hell with you," muttered Ballard. But he got up and crossed the threadbare carpet of the front room on stockinged feet. "Ballard," he snarled into the phone. Then he started listening.

Two minutes later he was running across the street to his Fairlane. That pig, he thought to himself as he drove toward the Mission district, that dirty pig.

It was nearly an hour later, well after midnight, when he tried the basement entrance of DKA and found it unlocked. At the far end the one-way glass door of Kearny's private office was open enough so that he could see Kearny and the back of O'Bannon's flaming red head. Working late, those two. As he had expected, the white Bonneville with the black convertible top was blocking the middle of the garage.

Ballard went down the narrow aisle the convertible left in front of the field agents' cubicles, stuck his head into the one that Morales habitually used, and gestured at the car.

"How did you turn her, Trin?" he asked. His voice was deceptively tranquil, considering that the hand which gripped the door frame was white-knuckled with tension. The chunky investigator glanced up from the report he was filling in and leered with self-satisfaction.

"I know how to dig, hot-shot." He tossed the case assignment to Ballard. "Here, read how you're supposed to do it."

Ballard leaned his long frame against the fender of the Pontiac to scan the report carbons stapled face-out to the back of the assignment sheet. Neither of them saw Kearny and O'Bannon emerge from the private office. O'B, a red-headed Irishman about Kearny's age, had been with him ever since the old days at Walter's Auto Detectives and was DKA's best field agent.

"So you caught up with her at work, huh, Trin?" asked Ballard.

"Yeah." Morales' eyes twinkled. "I ran the keys on it there today, see, so I could push it off tonight without no trouble."

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"Why didn't you just take it then, Trin?"

"I had other ideas, man." He stood up to get confidential. "I tailed her home tonight, see, and then I told her that Welfare had asked me to check if her old man was still living with her. Get it? Then I said *maybe* I'd report negative—if she was nice to me."

"That was awfully clever, Trin," said Ballard silkily.

Morales uttered a heavy complacent laugh. "Yeah. This works out even better, waiting until tomorrow. I've already got the car, and she's too dumb to know I'm just stringing her along. So she'll think I'm doing her a big favor by not reporting her to Welfare, when really—"

Ballard's fist caught him under the left eye and knocked him backward into a chair, which upset to dump him under the desk. The heavy agent burst out in a scrabbling crouch, roaring, to butt Ballard in the midsection. Ballard went to his knees against the Pontiac, his face distorted, and Morales aimed a vicious kick at the head.

O'Bannon's freckled hand flicked up and dumped Morales back on the desk top. O'B went in fast, got a forearm clamped across the throat, his wrist gripped by his other hand for added leverage. "Cool it, baby," he said.

Morales thrashed helplessly until Kearny appeared in the doorway; then O'Bannon released his grip and stepped back.

"You'd better go on home, Trin," said Kearny mildly. "You can finish those reports in the morning."

Morales began sullenly gathering up his case sheets. Ballard was leaning against the Pontiac, very pale and with sweat standing on his forehead, but with his jaw set stubbornly. As Morales started out with the folders bulging untidily under his arm Ballard stopped him.

"Don't try going over there again, Morales. She called me right after you left. Know why? Because she planned to pack up and run, so you'd just find an empty apartment when you got there; but she was worried that I might get into trouble about making her payments for her the last time. I told her to stay right where she was—but to call the cops if you ever showed your face around there again."

Morales clumped out without a response, but Kearny looked Ballard over with a grimace. "Playing games with a subject, huh?"

Larry shrugged uneasily; his color was gradually returning. No use trying to explain that he'd made the payments because he'd felt sorry for Maria—just that, and no strings attached. Not to Kearny. Kearny never worried about motives; just results.

As if on cue Kearny jerked his

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thumb at a board which was fastened to the partition between two of the cubicles. It was lined and divided to show each field agent's name, radio call number, and monthly work break-down.

"You see that tally board, Ballard? You see the number of repos Morales has made this month? The skips he's turned? The hours and mileage he's reported? The total of cases he's closed?"

"I—yes, sir."

Kearny rapped his knuckles on the Navarro car. "Morales put this Pontiac here—you didn't. Morales found the woman—you didn't. All you did was a damned sloppy job on this case while you had it. If you pull something like this again, you're out, get me? O-U-T. You're looking for a new job."

"Yes, sir," said Ballard.

"I'm on your back, Ballard, and don't you forget it."

They stared after the retreating field agent until the door closed, then O'B cleared his throat. His leathery drinker's face was mapped with the topography of a lifetime. "Say, Dan, weren't you a little hard on the kid? Think what our liability exposure would have been, say, if Morales had gotten away with it tomorrow night and that girl later yelled to the Welfare people."

Kearny's rugged features broke into a grin. "Well, O'B, think what sort of laugh would go around the circuit if our client ever found out that one of our own agents made a subject's car payments for her!" He shook his head. "I guess I'm getting soft. I sort of wanted to bust Morales one myself."

"You sure hid it well," said O'Bannon dryly.

They went out, setting the alarms and locking the solid-core hardwood door behind them. The fog was swirling in, around the parked cars, muffling the headlights and the mournful rumble of the traffic which shook the cement skyway above their heads. Kearny paused.

"I lit into Ballard because he's going to be a damned good man, O'B, and I don't want to see him get really hurt one of these days because he gets personally involved with a subject. As for Morales—" He slapped the redhead abruptly on the shoulder. "I'm giving him the sack in the morning. He's out. O-U-T. C'mon, I'll buy you a drink."

O'Bannon stared at Kearny for a long moment; then his irrepressible smile lit up his features.

"You know I never take *a* drink, Dan," he said happily.

The two men drew their topcoats about them and sauntered off into the fog like a pair of scarred and wise old alley cats out on the prowl.

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FIRST PRIZE WINNER NUMBER 4

Georges Simenon's First Prize Winner of 1948 is a tale of multiple murder—seven old women strangled at night on dark streets. It is a typically Gallic detective story compounded of suspense and terror—almost Grand Guignol—and told from a psychological viewpoint. The mental and emotional probing is not deep enough to be psychiatric, but it is not slight enough to be shallow or superficial; yet it does create a mood which catches the reader's imagination in the first two paragraphs and holds it to the very last line—and even beyond, for this story will remain fixed in your memory.

Like Simenon's best work, *Blessed Are the Meek* mirrors French middle-class people with a sincerity and realism which explain in part why the author's stories are so often described as "more than just detective stories." And it presents in the humble little tailor, Kachoudas, that appealing type of modern detective—the little man of the world (like Alfredo Segre's humble Italian organ grinder), the little man of profound good will but with all the fears and foibles and weaknesses of all the little men of the world . . .

BLESSED ARE THE MEEK

by GEORGES SIMENON

(*translated by Frances Frenaye*)

Blessed are the meek . . .

Kachoudas, the humble little tailor of the Rue des Premontres, was afraid; of this there could be no doubt. A thousand people, ten thousand to be exact—the entire population of the town except for the very young children—were afraid too; but most of them did not dare to admit it even in the privacy of their own bedrooms.

Several minutes had gone by since Kachoudas had lit the electric light which he pulled by a wire into a position directly over his work. It was not yet five o'clock but the darkness of the

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November evening had closed in around him. It had rained steadily for a whole fortnight. A hundred yards away, at the cinema festooned with purple lights where a bell sputtered to announce the beginning of every show, a newsreel showed people in other parts of the country navigating the streets in rowboats, and farmhouses cut off by torrents of water which carried along uprooted trees.

These facts were important; they had a bearing on the whole situation. If it hadn't been late autumn with the darkness coming on at four o'clock in the afternoon; if it hadn't rained from morning to night and from night to morning again, to the point where many people didn't have a stitch of dry clothes to put on their back; if there hadn't been gusts of wind whirling down the narrow streets and turning umbrellas inside out as if they were gloves, then perhaps Kachoudas wouldn't have been afraid and, what's more, nothing would have happened.

Kachoudas was sitting with crossed legs on the big table that he had polished with his hindquarters all day long for the thirty years he had plied his trade as a tailor. He worked on a mezzanine floor with a low ceiling just above his shop. Just across the street an enormous sign in the form of a red top hat hung over the sidewalk in front of a haberdashery. When Kachoudas looked out he could see under the sign into the shop of Monsieur Labbe.

This establishment was badly lighted. The electric-light bulbs were covered with dust and the window had not been washed for a long time. These details are less important, but they played their part. The haberdashery was old and so was the street on which it was situated, which had been the shopping center of the town before the five-and-ten-cent stores and others with glittering showcases had moved in on a thoroughfare five hundred yards away. Now the shops remaining on this dimly illuminated section of the street were so rundown that it looked as if no one ever went into them at all.

Here, then, was another reason for being afraid. And finally, this was the usual hour. At this time every day Kachoudas had the vaguely uncomfortable feeling that meant he must have the glass of white wine which a habit of long standing had made seem absolutely essential.

Monsieur Labbe across the street had exactly the same feeling; for him too this was the usual hour. As a result he would say a few words to Alfred, his red-headed clerk, and put on a heavy overcoat with a velvet collar.

At the same time the little tailor would get down from his table, knot his tie, put on his jacket, and go down the spiral stairway, call-

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ing out behind him, "I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

This wasn't strictly true. He invariably stayed away for half an hour, but for years now he had announced his return in fifteen minutes.

Just as he was slipping on his raincoat, one which a customer had left and forgotten to call for, he heard the automatic bell ring as the door opened across the street. Monsieur Labbe, his coat collar turned up and his hands in his pockets, was walking close to the walls on the sheltered part of the sidewalk in the direction of the Place Gambetta.

The tailor's bell rang too a moment later, and Kachoudas stepped into the driving rain hardly ten yards behind his neighbor.

The two of them were quite alone on the street, where the gas lamps were spaced far apart, leaving stretches of darkness between them.

With a few quick steps Kachoudas could have overtaken the haberdasher. They were acquainted, exchanged greetings when they shut up their shops at the same time, and spoke to each other in the Cafe de la Paix where they were both due to arrive in a few minutes. But they occupied quite different ranks in society. Monsieur Labbe was Monsieur Labbe and Kachoudas was only Kachoudas.

Kachoudas, then, was bringing up the rear, and this fact served to reassure him. If someone were to attack him he had only to cry out and the haberdasher would hear him. But what if the haberdasher were to run away? Kachoudas thought this over. The idea sent shivers down his spine, and the fear of being ambushed at a dark corner or alley caused him to walk in the middle of the street. There was not far to go. At the end of the Rue des Premontres lay the central square, well lighted and with a certain number of people about in spite of the rain. There a policeman was usually on duty.

The two men, one behind the other, turned to the left. The third building just ahead of them was the Cafe de la Paix, with its bright lights and comforting warmth. The regular customers were at their tables and Firmin, the waiter, was watching them play cards.

Monsieur Labbe took off his overcoat and shook it, and Firmin hung it on the rack. When Kachoudas came in no one helped him off with his raincoat. Naturally, for he was only Kachoudas. The card players and those who were looking on at their game shook the haberdasher's hand, and he sat down just behind the doctor. They gave a curt nod, or perhaps no sign of recognition at all, to Kachoudas who could find no better place to sit than right up against the stove. As a result steam began to rise from his trousers.

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The steaming wet trousers led the little tailor to make his discovery. He looked down at them and said to himself that because the cloth was not of very good quality the trousers would probably shrink again. Then, with a professional eye, he examined Monsieur Labbe's trousers to see if their material was better. Of course he did not make Monsieur Labbe's suits. None of the highly respectable people who frequented the cafe at this hour came to him for their clothes. At most they gave him linings or patchwork to do.

There was sawdust on the floor and wet feet had left irregular marks in it and clumps of mud here and there. Monsieur Labbe was wearing expensive shoes and dark gray, almost black, trousers. On the cuff of his left trouser leg there was a tiny spot of white. If Kachoudas had not been a tailor he would probably never have noticed it. He thought right away that it must be a thread, because tailors are given to pulling threads out. If he had not been such a humble little tailor he would probably not have leaned over to pick it off.

The haberdasher noticed his gesture with some surprise. Kachoudas seized the white spot, which had slid down into the cuff, and it turned out to be not a thread but a scrap of paper.

"Excuse me," he murmured.

The Kachoudases were always excusing themselves. Centuries ago, when they were driven like cattle from Armenia to Smyrna and Syria and other such places, they had acquired this cautious mannerism.

It must be stressed that while Kachoudas was straightening himself up there was not a single thought in his head. Or, to be exact, he thought only: "It isn't a thread, after all."

He could see the legs and feet of the card players, the cast-iron feet of the marble-topped tables, and Firmin's white apron. Instead of throwing the scrap of paper on the floor he held it out to the haberdasher, repeating: "Excuse me."

He felt that he must apologize because the haberdasher might wonder why in the world he had poked about in his trouser cuff.

But just as Monsieur Labbe took the paper, which was hardly bigger than a piece of confetti, Kachoudas suddenly stiffened and a most unpleasant shiver ran across the back of his neck. The worst of it was that the haberdasher and he were looking straight at each other. For a moment they went on staring. No one was paying them any attention; the players were at their cards and the others were watching the game.

Monsieur Labbe was a man who had been fat and then lost a good part of his weight. He was still fairly voluminous, but there was a flabby look about him. His droop-

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ing features were generally expressionless, and on this critical occasion they did not flicker. He took the paper, rolled it between his fingers until it was no bigger than a pinhead, and said, "Thanks, Kachoudas."

This caused the little tailor any amount of reflection; for days and nights after he asked himself: Was the haberdasher's voice natural? Ironical? Threatening? Sarcastic?

The tailor trembled and almost dropped the glass that he had picked up in order to keep his self-control. He must not look at Monsieur Labbe. It was too dangerous. It was a question of life and death—if, indeed, Kachoudas could hope to hang on to his life at all. He sat glued to his chair, apparently quite still, but with a feeling as if he were jumping up and down. There were moments when he had to hold himself back from running away as fast as he could go. What would happen if he were to get up and shout:

"This is the man!"

He was hot and cold at the same time. The heat of the stove was burning his skin and yet his teeth were on the point of chattering. All of a sudden he remembered how on the Rue des Premontres fear had caused him to follow the haberdasher as closely as he could. This was not the first time he had clung to his shadow, and he had done so only a quarter of an hour before. They had been quite alone in the dark street and now he knew that this was the man! The little tailor wanted to look at him on the sly, but he did not dare. One look might seal his fate.

Above all he must not run his hand over his neck, as he had a violent longing to do, akin to the temptation to scratch a bad itch.

"Another white wine, Firmin."

A further blunder. Usually he let half an hour go by before ordering a second glass. What should he do? What could he do?

The walls of the Cafe de la Paix were studded with mirrors, which reflected rising coils of cigarette and pipe smoke. Monsieur Labbe was the only one who smoked cigars and Kachoudas occasionally caught a whiff of them. At the other end of the room, on the right, near the washroom, there was a telephone booth. Under the pretext of going to the toilet, couldn't he slip into it?

"Hello . . . Police? Your man is here . . ."

What if Monsieur Labbe were to push into the booth behind him? No one would hear, for it was always done quite noiselessly. Not a single one of the six victims had cried out. They were all old women, to be sure. The killer had never attacked anyone but an old woman. That was why the men were so bold and did not hesitate to go out on the streets. But there was no reason why the killer

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should not break the rule.

"The man you're after is here. Come and get him . . ."

Twenty thousand francs would be coming to him. This was the reward that everyone was trying to win—so many people, indeed, that the police were at their wits' end with the number of wild clues they were asked to follow. If he had twenty thousand francs . . But, first of all, who would believe him? He would say:

"It's the haberdasher!"

And they would reply: "Prove it."

"I saw two letters—"

"What letters?"

"An *n* and a *t*."

He really wasn't sure about the *t*.

"Explain exactly what you mean, Kachoudas."

They would talk sternly to him; people always talk sternly to a Kachoudas.

". . in the cuff of his trouser . . Then he rolled it into a tiny ball."

Incidentally, where was that tiny ball now, the ball the size of a pinhead? Just try and find it! Monsieur Labbe might have let it drop on the floor where he could grind it with his heel into the sawdust. Or he might have swallowed it.

What did it prove anyhow? That the haberdasher had cut two letters out of a newspaper? Not even that much. He might have picked up the scrap of paper almost anywhere without even noticing it. And what if he *had* had a whim to cut the letters out of a newspaper? It was enough to unsettle a much stronger man than the little tailor, to upset any one of the respectable businessmen sitting about him—shopkeepers, an insurance agent, a wine merchant, all well enough off to spend a good part of the afternoon playing cards and to drink several *aperitifs* every day.

They didn't know. No one knew except Kachoudas. And the man was aware that Kachoudas knew . . . The little tailor was perspiring as if he had drunk hot grog and taken a powerful dose of aspirin. Had the haberdasher noticed his nervousness? Did Kachoudas look as if he had caught on to the meaning of the scrap of paper?

How could he think over these critical matters without betraying his thoughts, when the other man was smoking his cigar less than six feet away and he, Kachoudas, was supposed to be watching the card players?

"A white wine, Firmin."

He spoke up quite unintentionally, almost in spite of himself, because his throat was so dry. Three glasses of white wine were too many, more than he had ever drunk at a time except when his children were born. He had eight children now and was waiting for a ninth. No sooner was one born

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than another seemed to follow. It wasn't his fault, although every time people looked at him accusingly.

How could anyone kill a man with eight children and a ninth on the way, and probably a tenth after that? Just then someone, the insurance agent, who was dealing out the cards, said, "Queer, he hasn't killed an old woman for three days now. He must be scared."

There was Kachoudas, knowing what he knew, obliged to listen to this remark without so much as a look at the haberdasher. Then he had a stroke of his usual bad luck. As by dint of a tremendous effort he looked straight ahead of him, he saw Monsieur Labbe's face in a mirror on the wall. Monsieur Labbe was staring right at him. He was perfectly at ease, but none the less he was staring and it seemed to the little tailor as if there were a slight smile on his lips. He began to wonder if the haberdasher wasn't going to wink at him, the way he might wink at the accomplice, as if to say, "A good joke, eh?"

Kachoudas heard his own voice say, "Waiter...."

A very poor idea. Three glasses of wine were enough, more than enough, especially as too much made him sick.

"Your order, Monsieur?"

"Oh, nothing... thank you..."

After all, there was one perfectly reasonable explanation. It was a bit hazy in the little tailor's mind, but it did hold water. There might be two men instead of one: one of them the killer of old women of whom nothing was known beyond the fact that he had done away with six of them in the last three weeks; the other merely someone who wanted to amuse himself and mystify the town—an eccentric, perhaps, who sent the famous communications addressed to the *Courrier de la Loire* made up of single letters cut out of newspapers.

Why not? Such things have been known to happen. There are people who get strange ideas in their heads where crime is concerned. But if there were two men instead of one, how could the second one, who cut out and pasted up the letters, prophesy what the first one would do next?

For at least three of the murders had been announced ahead of time, all of them exactly the same way. The communications came to the *Courrier de la Loire* in the mail and usually the words in them had been cut right out of the *Courrier* itself and carefully stuck one beside the other. For instance:

It was no use to call out a special squad. Another old woman tomorrow.

Some of the communications were longer. It must have taken

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quite some time to find the right words in the newspaper and fit them together like a puzzle.

Inspector Micou thinks he's smart just because he came down from Paris. But he's only a choir boy. He's foolish to drink all that brandy; it only makes his nose red.

By the way, didn't Inspector Micou, whom the *Surete Nationale* had sent to organize the hunt for the killer, stop in every now and then for a drink at the Cafe de la Paix? The little tailor had seen him there. It was quite true that he liked brandy, and people would question him quite casually.

"Well, then, Inspector?"

"We'll get him, never fear. Maniacs of his kind are sure to slip up on something. They're too pleased with themselves and they have to boast of what they've done."

Yes, the haberdasher had been right there when the Inspector had spoken these words.

Some fools say it's cowardice that makes me kill only old women. What if I simply can't stand old women? I have a right to dislike them, haven't I? But if they go on with this slander I'll kill a man, just to please them. A big strong man, too. It's all the same to me. That will teach them a lesson!

Kachoudas was small and thin, no bigger than a fifteen-year-old boy.

"You see, Inspector—"

The tailor jumped. Inspector Micou had just walked into the cafe along with Pijolet, the dentist. The Inspector was stout and hearty. He turned a chair around and sat astride it opposite the card players.

"Don't bother to move," he said to them.

"How's the hunt going?"

"Getting along, thank you, getting along."

"Any clues?"

Kachoudas could still see Monsieur Labbe staring at him in the mirror, and he had a new and frightening thought. What if Monsieur Labbe were innocent—innocent of the murders and of writing to the newspaper about them? What if he had got the scrap of paper into his trouser cuff by mere chance, as one sometimes gets a flea?

He must put himself in the other's place. Kachoudas had leaned over and picked something up. Monsieur Labbe couldn't know where the scrap of paper had come from. Perhaps the little tailor himself had let it fall and tried to make it disappear on the floor, then nervously picked it up and held it out to his neighbor. Yes, why shouldn't the haberdasher suspect him just as much as he suspected the haberdasher?

"A white wine—"

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Never mind! He had drunk too much, but all the same he wanted more. There seemed to him to be more smoke than usual in the cafe; faces were blurred and the card players' table faded away into the distance.

Yes, think of that. If Monsieur Labbe suspected him in exactly the same way... Would he too set his mind on the twenty-thousand-franc reward? People said that he was rich, that it was because he didn't need money that he let his business slide. Otherwise he would clean his windows or even enlarge them, add more lighting, and get in some new stock. He couldn't hope that people would come to buy the hats in the styles of twenty years ago that sat on his dust-covered shelves.

Yes, if he were a miser the twenty thousand francs might be a temptation. He had only to accuse Kachoudas, and most people would believe him. For Kachoudas was just the sort of fellow everyone inclines to distrust. Because he hadn't been born in the town, or even in the country, and he had a queerly shaped head which he held a little to one side. Because he lived among an ever-increasing brood of children and his wife hardly spoke a word of French.

But what of that? Why should the little tailor attack old women in the street without bothering to steal even their jewels or their handbags? So Kachoudas reasoned to himself, but the next minute he saw that the same argument held good for the haberdasher.

"Why should Monsieur Labbe, after living sixty years as a model citizen, suddenly feel an urge to strangle old women in dark streets?"

The problem was a complicated one. Neither the familiar atmosphere of the Cafe de la Paix nor the presence of Inspector Micou was reassuring any longer. Let someone merely suggest to Micou that Kachoudas was guilty and Micou would take him at his word. But if it were a question of Monsieur Labbe...

He must think it over seriously. It was a question of life and death. Hadn't the killer announced in the newspaper that he might attack a man next? There was the badly lighted Rue des Premontres to walk through, and his shop was just across from that of the haberdasher, who could spy on everything he did. Then there were the twenty thousand francs. Twenty thousand! More than he could earn in six months...

"Tell me, Kachoudas—"

He felt as if he were coming down to earth from very far away, back among people whose presence he had for several minutes completely forgotten. Because he did not recognize the voice, his first impulse was to turn toward the haberdasher who looked at him as he chewed his cigar. But it was

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not the haberdasher who had spoken to him, it was the Inspector.

"Is it true that you work fast and don't overcharge?"

In a split second he realized what an unexpected piece of good luck this was, and he almost looked over at Monsieur Labbe to see if he had noticed the relief in his face. Kachoudas would never have dared go to the police. And he would have hesitated to write them a letter, because letters go into the files and one can never tell when they may cause trouble. And now the Inspector himself, the representative of the law, had practically offered to come to him.

"When it's for mourning I can deliver a suit within twenty-four hours," he said modestly, lowering his eyes.

"Then pretend that I'm going into mourning for the six old women and make me a suit just as fast. I brought hardly anything with me from Paris and the rain has been hard on my clothes. You have some good wool cloth, I hope."

"The best there is."

Good Lord! The little tailor's thoughts were running away with him! Perhaps it was the effect of four glasses of white wine. So much the worse! He ordered a fifth glass, in a more self-assured tone of voice than usual. Something wonderful was going to happen. Instead of going back alone, stricken with fear of Monsieur Labbe at every dark corner, he would get the Inspector to go with him, under the pretext of taking his measurements. And once they were in the shop, behind closed doors... What a magnificent chance! The reward would be his! Twenty thousand francs! And without the slightest risk!

"If you can come with me for five minutes ... My place is near."

His voice trembled. This was luck of the sort a Kachoudas can't count on, not after centuries of having been kicked around by his fellowmen and an unkind fate.

"I could take your measurements and have it ready for tomorrow evening at the same time."

How happy he was to get off to such a good start. All his worries were over, and everything was turning out all right, as if this were a fairy tale. Men playing cards... good old Firmin (everyone looks good at a moment like this) watching the game... the haberdasher, whose gaze he sought to avoid ... the Inspector coming back with him... they would go out together... he would close the door of his shop and no one would hear ... "Listen, Inspector, I know who the killer is!"

Then his hopes were dashed to the ground. One little sentence spoiled everything.

"I'm not in that much of a hurry, you know."

The Inspector wanted to join in the card game and he knew that

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someone would give him a place as soon as the hand was over.

"I'll come by tomorrow morning. You're always there, I suppose, aren't you? In weather like this, anyhow."

It was all up. His fine plans had collapsed. Yet the whole thing had seemed so easy. By tomorrow he would probably be dead, and his wife and children would never have the twenty thousand francs which he was entitled to leave them. For he was more and more convinced that he had a right to the reward. He was sure of it, and he rebelled against the sudden obstacle in his path.

"If you were to come this evening I could take advantage—"

No use. The haberdasher must be laughing up his sleeve. The hand was over and the insurance agent gave his place up to Inspector Micou. Detectives had no business playing cards! They should catch on to the slightest hint. Kachoudas couldn't very well beg him on bended knee to come at once for his measurements.

How was he to go away? Usually he stayed no more than half an hour at the cafe. This was his only distraction, his one folly. Then he always went home. The children were all back from school by then and they made the most infernal noise. The house smelled of cooking. Dolphine (she had a ridiculously French name in spite of hardly knowing the language) called them in a shrill voice. And he pulled down the light over his work and sewed for long hours, perched on the mezzanine table..

He himself smelled, he knew that. He smelled of garlic, which they used abundantly in their cooking, and of the grease in the wool materials that he worked with all day. There were people in the Cafe de la Paix who drew back their chairs whenever he sat down near the table of the regular customers. Was that enough of a reason why the Inspector shouldn't come with him? Every one of the others in the cafe lived in the direction of the Rue du Palais; they all turned to the left when they went out, while he turned to the right. It was a matter of life and death.

"One more, Firmin."

Another glass of white wine. He had a terrible fear that the haberdasher might follow him out the door. But after he had ordered his wine it occurred to him that if Monsieur Labbe went out ahead of him he might lie in waiting at a dark corner of the Rue des Premontres. There was danger if the haberdasher left first, and even more danger if he left second. And yet Kachoudas couldn't stay there all night.

"Firmin—"

He hesitated. He knew that he was wrong, that he was going to be drunk, but there was nothing else to do.

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"One more of the same."

Everyone was sure to look at him with suspicion.

"How is Mathilde?"

Someone had just asked this question, but who was it? Kachoudas's head was heavy by now; he must have been at his seventh glass of wine. In fact, there was curiosity as to whether he was celebrating the arrival of a new baby. The question he had just heard might have been from Germain, the grocer. It didn't matter much, anyhow. The men were all about the same age, between sixty and sixty-five. Most of them had been in the same class at school; they had started out playing marbles together. Later on they had gone to each other's weddings and all their lives long they spoke to each other in intimate terms. Probably every one of them, when he was fifteen or sixteen years old, had courted a girl who had later married one of his friends.

There was another group of cronies, ranging from forty to fifty years of age, who were ready to step into the shoes of their elders as soon as they left this earthly scene. They played cards at another table, in the left-hand corner of the cafe. They were a good deal noisier, but they arrived later on, about six o'clock, because they didn't have quite as much leisure.

"How is Mathilde?"

This was a phrase that the little tailor heard almost every day. Someone would say it quite casually, just as if he were saying, "Is it still raining?" For Mathilde, the haberdasher's wife, had long since become a legend. Once upon a time she must have been a young girl like the rest. Perhaps some of the card players had stolen a kiss from her in their younger days. Then she had got married and probably she went in her best clothes to ten o'clock mass every Sunday. For fifteen years she had lived on a mezzanine floor, just opposite to Kachoudas, but her curtains were almost always drawn together. He could only guess at the presence of her motionless white face behind the lace hangings.

"Mathilde's all right."

In other words, she was no worse, but her condition was just the same. She was a paralytic; every morning she was put into a chair and every evening put back to bed. So that the best that could be said for her was that she wasn't yet dead. After Mathilde the players spoke of a number of other things. They barely mentioned the killer, because the customers of the Cafe de la Paix affected a lack of interest in such things.

Kachoudas had not dared to go away for fear the haberdasher would leave just behind him. And so he went on drinking. Two or three times he noticed that Monsieur Labbe looked at the pale face

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of the clock hanging between two mirrors, but it never occurred to him to wonder why. This, however, is how he happened to notice that it was exactly seventeen minutes after six when the haberdasher got up and rapped with a coin on the marble table top to summon Firmin.

"How much do I owe you?"

When a man came in he usually shook hands all around, but when he went out he said goodbye to everyone together. Some said, "See you tomorrow," and others said, "See you later on," which meant that they were coming back for another game after dinner.

"He'll lie in wait at a dark corner of the Rue des Premontres and jump out at me as I go by."

If only he could pay for his own drinks in time to follow close on the haberdasher's heels and not let him out of his sight! Kachoudas was the shorter and thinner of the two and probably he could run faster. The best thing to do was to keep a short distance behind and be ready to run at the least sign of suspicious behavior.

The two men went out, one a few seconds after the other. Strangely enough the card players turned to look after the little tailor rather than the haberdasher. There was something uneasy in his manner and a doubt had crossed their minds. Someone half murmured, "Could he be the one?"

Outside the wind was raging. At every corner it struck a man in the face and he either had to bend over double or else be thrown backward by its impact. It was raining hard. The little tailor's face was streaming and he shivered beneath his light raincoat. Never mind; he was right at the haberdasher's heels. He must keep up the pace, for in this nearness lay his only hope of safety.

Three hundred yards more, two hundred yards, one hundred yards, and he would be home where he could lock the door and barricade himself in until the Inspector came the next morning to see him.

He was still counting the seconds when he noticed that the haberdasher had gone by his shop, where the redheaded clerk could still be vaguely seen behind the counter. Kachoudas went by his own place almost unconsciously; a force stronger than himself impelled him to follow. Just as a little earlier the two of them were alone on the street, they continued to be alone in the more and more deserted section of the town which they were now entering. Each one of them could hear the other's footsteps, besides the echoes of his own. The haberdasher must know that he was being followed.

Kachoudas was half out of his senses with fear. Couldn't he stop, turn around, and go back home? Of course. Perhaps. But this never even occurred to him. Strange as it may seem, he was too con-

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gealed by fright. He went on, keeping about twenty yards behind his companion, and from time to time he spoke through the wind and rain to himself:

"If he's really the killer..."

Was he still uncertain? Was it in order to satisfy his conscience that he had undertaken this chase? Every now and then the two men passed a lighted shop window. Then, one after the other, they plunged back into the darkness and could place each other only by the sound of their footsteps.

"If he stops, I'll stop too."

The haberdasher did stop, and the tailor stopped after him. Then the haberdasher went on and the tailor followed him with a sigh of relief.

There were patrols all over the town, at least according to the newspaper. In order to preserve calm the police had thought up a so-called infallible patrol system. And indeed, as they strode on, one behind the other, they met three men in uniform trudging along in step, and Kachoudas heard them say, "Good evening, Monsieur Labbe."

When they came to him they flashed a light in his face and said nothing.

There were no old women in the streets. It was enough to make one wonder where the killer ever found his victims. They must all cling to their homes, and go out only in broad daylight, preferably under escort. The two men passed the church of Saint Jean, where a dim light shone at the door. But for the last three weeks the old women must have given up coming to benediction.

The streets were growing narrower. There were empty lots and fences between the houses.

"He's luring me outside of town to kill me."

Kachoudas was not a brave man, and how he was thoroughly afraid and ready to call for help at the least untoward movement on the part of the haberdasher. If he still followed him, it was not of his own free will.

They had come to a quiet street with new houses along it. He could hear the footsteps, and then all of a sudden there was silence. Kachoudas came to a stop in imitation of the man he was following, sight unseen. Where had the haberdasher gone? The sidewalks were dark. There were only three street lamps, at some distance from each other. There were a few lighted windows and from one house came strains of piano music. Always the same series of chords—from an exercise, Kachoudas thought, for he was not musical, which a learner was repeating over and over again with the same mistake at the end every time.

Had the rain stopped? In any case he was no longer aware of it. He dared neither go on nor turn back. He was alarmed by the

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slightest sound and worried lest the piano prevent him from hearing the footsteps that he was listening for.

The chords sounded five, ten times more, then the top of a piano was banged down. Evidently a lesson was at an end. There were loud cries and noise in the house. Probably a little girl, now that she was dismissed, was running to join her brothers and sisters. And someone was putting on a coat and saying to the mother at the door:

"She's made some progress. . But the left hand...She simply must practice with that left hand."

The door opened and the music teacher, who stood for a moment in a rectangle of light, was an elderly maiden lady.

"I promise you, Madame Bardon...I've only a hundred yards to go."

Kachoudas could not breathe. It never occurred to him to call out, "Stay where you are! Whatever you do, don't move!"

And yet he knew. He understood already how things would go. The old lady, who must have been a bit nervous, came down three steps from the door and trotted along close to the wall. It was her own street, after all, and she lived nearby. She had been born on this street and as a child she had played on its sidewalks and doorsteps; she knew every stick and stone of it.

Kachoudas heard her light, quick steps—then no steps at all! That was about all he could hear: the absence of footsteps. There was complete silence, and then a vague noise like the rustling of clothes. Could he possibly make himself move? And what good would it do? If he called for help, would anyone have the courage to come out of the house? He leaned up against a wall and his shirt stuck to his back, soaked with perspiration.

"Ah!" Kachoudas was the one to sigh. Perhaps the old lady had sighed too, for the last time.

He heard steps again, a man's steps, retracing the way. The steps were coming toward Kachoudas. And Kachoudas, who had felt so sure that he could run faster than the haberdasher, could not even raise one foot from the ground! The haberdasher would see him. But didn't he know already that he was there? Hadn't he heard him just behind all the way from the Cafe de la Paix?

None of that mattered any more. Now the little tailor was entirely at the killer's mercy. This was Kachoudas' very clear impression and he did not argue with himself about it. The haberdasher seemed to take on superhuman proportions and Kachoudas was ready to fall down on his knees, if necessary, and swear to keep quiet for the rest of his life. Hang the twenty thousand francs!

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He did not move as Monsieur Labbe drew nearer. Soon they would touch. At the last minute would Kachoudas have the strength to run? And if he did run, wouldn't he be accused of the murder? All the haberdasher had to do was to call for the police. They would run after him and catch him.

"Why were you running away?"

"Because..."

"Speak up. Didn't you kill the old lady?"

The two of them were alone on the street, and there was nothing to indicate that one of them was guilty rather than the other. Monsieur Labbe was quicker-witted, and he was a man of a certain position, a native of the town, on intimate terms with the leading citizens and with a cousin in parliament.

"Good night, Kachoudas."

Strange as it may seem, that was all that happened.

Monsieur Labbe must have barely made out his silhouette drawn back into the shadows. To tell the truth, Kachoudas had climbed up onto a doorstep and he had a finger on the doorbell, ready to push it at a moment's notice. And then the killer greeted him quietly as he went by, with a voice that was muffled but not particularly threatening.

"Good night, Kachoudas."

He tried to answer, for the sake of politeness. It seemed to him absolutely necessary to have good manners with a man of this type and to return his greeting. He opened his mouth, but in vain; no sound came out of it. The footsteps were already moving away when he managed to get out: "Good night, sir."

He heard his own voice, but he had spoken too late, when the haberdasher was already some distance away. Out of sheer delicacy Kachoudas had not called Monsieur Labbe by name, in order not to compromise him in any way. Exactly!

He was still on the doorstep. He had not the slightest desire to go see the old lady who half an hour before had been giving a piano lesson and who by now must have definitely gone on to another world. Monsieur Labbe was far away by this time.

All of a sudden panic overtook him. He mustn't stay in this place. He felt a strong urge to get away as fast as his legs would take him, and at the same time he was afraid of running into the haberdasher. He might be arrested from one minute to the next. Just a short while before a patrol had flashed a light in his face; they had seen and recognized him. How could he explain his presence in this section of the town, where he had no business and where someone had just been murdered? So much the worse! The best thing was to make a clean breast of the whole

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thing to the police. He started to walk along at a good pace, moving his lips.

"I'm only a poor tailor, Inspector, but I swear on the heads of my children—"

The least noise made him jump. The haberdasher might now be lying in ambush for him, just as he had done for the old lady. He took a roundabout way, and wandered through a maze of narrow streets where he had never set foot before.

"He couldn't imagine that I would come by here."

He wasn't a complete fool.

"I'm willing to tell you everything, but you must assign one or two of your men to guard me until he's behind the bars."

If need be, he'd stay at the police station. Not a very comfortable place, but he'd seen worse in the course of his travels. He wouldn't hear his children's whining, that was one good thing. It was not very far from his own house, just two streets beyond the Rue des Premontres. Already he could see the red light with the word *Police* across it. There must be an officer right at the door, as usual. He was in no danger. In fact, he was safe at last.

"You'd be making a serious mistake, Monsieur Kachoudas."

He stopped short. A real voice had spoken, the voice of a man of flesh and blood, the voice of the haberdasher. The haberdasher stood there against the wall, with his calm face barely visible through the darkness. Is a man responsible for his actions at such a moment? Kachoudas stammered, "I beg your pardon?"

Just as if he had bumped into someone on the street, or trod on a lady's foot. Then, when nothing more was said and he was let strictly alone, he turned quietly around. He must not look as if he were running away; on the contrary, he must walk in a perfectly normal manner. No one was going to follow him right away. He had time to escape. At last he did hear steps behind him, but they were neither quicker nor slower than his own. In other words, the haberdasher wouldn't catch up with him.

Here was his own street, and his shop with a few samples of dark materials and some fashion drawings in the window. And the other shop, across the street. He opened the door, shut it again, and turned the key in the lock.

"Is that you?" his wife called.

As if it could have been anyone else at such a late hour and in this weather!

"Be sure to wipe off your shoes."

At this point he wondered whether he was really awake. After all he had lived through, and with the massive shadow of the haberdasher still looming at the opposite doorway, all she could say was:

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"Be sure to wipe off your shoes."

He felt very much like fainting. And what would she have said then?

Kachoudas was kneeling on the floor with his back to the window and just in front of him, only a few inches from his nose, were the rotund legs and stomach of a man in an upright position. This man was Inspector Micou, who had not been distracted by the crime of the evening before from coming to have the tailor take his measurements.

The little tailor passed his tape measure around the waist and the hips, wet his pencil on the end of his tongue, and wrote down the figures in a greasy notebook lying on the floor; then he went on to measure the length of the trouser leg and the crotch. All this time Monsieur Labbe stood behind the lace curtains of the window at exactly the same height on the other side of the street. There were no more than eight yards between them.

Kachoudas had an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. The haberdasher would not shoot, he was sure of that. He would not shoot because, first of all, he was not the sort of murderer to go in for firearms. Murderers have their pet ways of doing things, just like anyone else, and they are not easily divorced from their habits. Besides, if he did shoot, he would simply be giving himself up to the police.

In the next place, the haberdasher had confidence in Kachoudas. This was the real point. And yet couldn't the little tailor, from his kneeling position, murmur to the rotund statue whose measurements he was taking:

"Don't move. Pretend nothing has happened. The haberdasher across the street is the killer. He's spying on us right now from behind his window."

But he said nothing at all, and continued to play the part of an innocent and unpretentous tailor. There was an unpleasant odor on the mezzanine, but this did not bother Kachoudas in the slightest degree, for he was quite used to the greasy smell of wool which he carried around with him wherever he went. Probably Monsieur Labbe's shop across the way had the staler and even more unpleasant odor of felt and glue. Every trade has its own stink. If such is the case, what smell is characteristic of a detective? This thought ran through Kachoudas' mind, proving that he had recovered to some extent his aplomb.

"If you can come back late this afternoon for a fitting, I hope I can let you have your suit tomorrow morning."

He went downstairs behind the Inspector, then passed in front of him as they walked through the shop, and opened the door, causing the bell to ring automatically.

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Neither of them had spoken of the killer, or of the elderly maiden lady, Mademoiselle Irene Mollard, whose murder was all over the front page of the newspaper.

And yet the tailor had spent a very restless night, so restless that his wife had wakened him to say, "Try to lie quietly, will you? You do nothing but kick me!"

After that he could not fall asleep again. He lay awake, thinking hour after hour until his head began to ache. By six o'clock in the morning he had enough of lying in bed and thinking, and he got up. After he had made himself a cup of coffee he went to his workroom and lit a fire. Of course he had to put a light on, for it was not yet day. There was a light across the street too, since for years the haberdasher had got up at half-past five every morning. Unfortunately one couldn't see him through the curtains, but it was easy to guess what he was doing.

Monsieur Labbe's wife would have no callers. Very rarely did a friend penetrate beyond the front door and then for only a short time. She would not receive care even from the hands of the cleaning woman, who arrived every morning at seven o'clock and stayed until night. Monsieur Labbe had to do everything for her himself—put her room in order, bring up her meals, and carry her from her bed to her chair and back. Twenty times a day, when he heard her signal, he rushed up his spiral stairway from the shop to the mezzanine floor. Her signal was a very special one. A cane was placed near her chair and she still had enough strength in her left hand to tap with it on the floor.

The little tailor went back to his work, sitting cross-legged on the table.

"Watch out, Kachoudas," he said to himself. "Twenty thousand francs are no joke, and it would be too bad to let them go. But life is worth something too, even the life of a little tailor from the wilds of Armenia. Even if the haberdasher is crazy, he can think faster than you. If he's arrested they'll probably have to let him go—for lack of proof. It's not very likely that he amuses himself by scattering bits of newspaper all over the house."

It was wise to think things over unhurriedly as he sewed. Already a new idea had come to him. Some of the communications sent to the *Courrier de la Loire* were a whole page long. It must have taken hours of painstaking work to find the right words and letters, cut them out, and paste them up in order. Downstairs in the haberdashery shop Alfred, the red-headed clerk, was always about. Behind the shop there was a workshop with wooden head forms where Monsieur Labbe blocked

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hats, but a peephole with a glass window connected these two downstairs rooms. The cleaning woman reigned over the kitchen and the rest of the house, so that a process of elimination made it clear that the only place where the killer could devote himself to his cutting and pasting was the bedroom shared by his wife and himself, where no one was allowed to enter. Madame Labbe could not move; she could not even talk except by making a succession of weird sounds. What did she think when she saw her husband cutting out scraps of paper?

"What's more, Kachoudas, my friend, if you accuse him now and some proof of his guilt is found, those fellows (he meant the police and even his new customer, Inspector Micou) will claim that they did the whole job and take the reward away from you."

Fear of losing the twenty thousand francs and fear of Monsieur Labbe. The tailor was caught between these two fears. But by nine o'clock his fear of the haberdasher had almost gone. In the middle of the night the noise of water flooding the gutters, of raindrops beating on the roof and of wind whistling through the shutters, came to a sudden end. After a long fortnight the storm was miraculously over.

By six in the morning there was only a drizzle of rain, silent and almost invisible to the naked eye. Now patches of the sidewalk returned to their natural gray color and people were walking around without umbrellas. It was Saturday, the weekly market day. The market occupied a little old square at the end of the street.

At nine o'clock, then, Kachoudas went downstairs, unlatched his door and started to take away the heavy dark green wood panels that protected the windows of his shop. He was carrying in the third of these panels when he heard the noise of panels of exactly the same sort coming down across the street at the haberdashery. He took care not to look around. He was not too worried because the butcher was talking from his doorstep to the shoemaker. He heard steps coming across the street and then a voice said, "Good morning, Kachoudas."

With a panel in one hand Kachoudas managed to say in an almost natural tone of voice, "Good morning, Monsieur Labbe."

"Look here, Kachoudas—"

"Yes, Monsieur Labbe?"

"Has there ever been anyone crazy in your family?"

His first reaction was to dig into his memory, to think of all his uncles and aunts.

"I don't think so . . ."

There was a satisfied look on Monsieur Labbe's face, and he said just before turning around, "That doesn't matter . . . that doesn't matter."

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The two men had made contact, that was all. What they had actually said was of no importance. They had exchanged a few words like the good neighbors they were. Kachoudas had not shown any fear. Wouldn't the butcher over there, who was big and strong enough to carry a hog on his shoulders, have paled if someone had said to him:

"That man looking at you with those grave dreamy eyes is the killer of the seven old women."

At the moment Kachoudas could think of nothing but the twenty thousand francs. He went back up to his low-ceilinged mezzanine workroom, climbed up on the table, and sat down to work again.

Across the street Monsieur Labbe was blocking hats. He didn't sell many new hats but his friends at the Cafe de la Paix had him block their old ones. Every now and then he appeared in a vest and shirt sleeves in the shop. And from time to time, when he heard his wife's signal, he dashed up the spiral staircase.

When Madame Kachoudas came back from the market and began to talk to herself in the kitchen, as she always did, there was a slight smile on the tailor's face. What was it the newspaper had said?

If we go back over the crimes one by one we shall see...

First of all, the article went on to say, the crimes were committed not in any particular section of the town, but at its farthest extremities. *Therefore,* the writer concluded, *the killer can go from place to place without attracting attention. This means that he is an ordinary, or innocent-looking man. In spite of the fact that his crimes are committed in the dark he has to walk under street lamps or in front of lighted shop windows.*

He's a man who doesn't need money, because he doesn't rob his victims.

He must be a musician, because he surprises his victims from the rear and strangles them with the string of a violin or a cello.

If we look back over the list of the women he has killed...

This aroused the interest of Kachoudas.

...we shall see that there is a certain connection among them. This isn't very easy to put a finger on. Their social status has varied. The first one was the widow of a retired army officer and the mother of two married children who live in Paris. The second kept a little dry-goods shop and her husband has a job at the Town Hall. The third...

A midwife, a clerk in a bookshop, a rich old lady living in a house all her own, a half-crazy woman, rich too, who wore nothing but lavender, and finally Mademoiselle Irene Mollard, the music teacher.

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Most of these women, the article continued, *were from sixty-three to sixty-five years old and all of them were natives of this town.*

The little tailor was struck by the name of Irene. One doesn't expect an old woman or an old maid to be called Irene, or Chouchou, or Lili... One forgets that long before she was old she was a young girl and once upon a time a little child. You see! There was nothing extraordinary about that. But while he worked on the Inspector's suit Kachoudas mulled this idea over and over in his mind.

What went on, for instance, at the Cafe de la Paix? A dozen or so men met there every afternoon. They were from various walks of life, most of them fairly well off, because it is normal to have attained a certain prosperity after the age of sixty. They all called each other by their first names. And not only did they call each other by their first names, but they spoke in a language all their own, with bits of slang and jokes that nobody outside the group could understand or appreciate. And this was simply because they had all gone to the same school and done their military service together. This was the reason why Kachoudas would always be treated like a stranger, why nobody asked him to take a hand at a card game unless there was no one else available. For months he had waited for an empty place at a card table.

"Do you see what I mean, Inspector? I'm sure that the seven victims knew each other as well as the regular customers at the Cafe de la Paix. It's only because old ladies don't go to cafes that they see each other less frequently. We must find out whether they weren't all friends and how often they called on one another. They were all about the same age, Inspector. Then there's one more detail that comes back to my mind; it was in the newspaper too. Each one of them was described in somewhat the same words as being *well born* and *well educated.*"

Of course, he wasn't talking to Inspector Micou or to any other member of the police. He had a way of talking to himself, like his wife, especially when he was happy.

"Let us imagine that we know on what basis the killer—I mean, the haberdasher—chose his victims ..."

For he picked them out in advance —Kachoudas had witnessed that. He didn't just stroll around the streets casually in the evening and jump on the first old woman who crossed his path. The proof of this lay in the fact that he had made straight for the house where Mademoiselle Mollard (Irene) was giving a music lesson. He must have acted in the same way on previous occasions. As soon as it could be found out how he laid his plans, on what basis he drew

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up his list ... Exactly! Why not? He was proceeding just as if he had drawn up a complete and definitive list. Kachoudas could imagine him coming home at night and scratching off a name.

How many old women were on the list altogether? How many women were there in the whole town between sixty-three and sixty-five years of age, *well born* and *well educated?*

Before the tailor had lunch at noon he went downstairs for a moment to get a breath of fresh air on the sidewalk and to buy some cigarettes at the corner tobacco shop. Monsieur Labbe was just coming out of his door, with his hands in his overcoat pockets. When he saw the little tailor he pulled out one of his hands and gave a friendly wave. This was the way it should be. They exchanged greetings and smiled. Probably the haberdasher had a letter in his pocket and was on his way to mail it. After each murder he sent a communication to the local newspaper. The one which Kachoudas read that evening in the *Courrier de la Loire* ran as follows:

Inspector Micou is silly to enlarge his wardrobe as if he were going to stay here months longer. Two more and I'll have finished. Greetings to my little friend across the street.

Kachoudas read the newspaper in the Cafe de la Paix. The Inspector himself was there, somewhat concerned about the delivery of his suit when he saw that the tailor had left his work. The haberdasher was there too, playing cards.

Monsieur Labbe found a way of looking at Kachoudas with a smile, a smile with no reservations behind it. Perhaps he really made no reservations, but had a feeling of genuine friendship. Then the little tailor realized that the haberdasher was glad that there was at least one witness of his deeds, someone who had seen him at work. In short, someone to admire him! And he too smiled, slightly embarrassed.

"I must go work on your suit, Inspector. You can try it in an hour ... Firmin!"

He hesitated. Yes or no? Yes! Quick, a white wine! A man who's going to make twenty thousand francs can easily afford a second glass.

The little tailor was impressed. First of all by the chimes of the doorbell, whose echoes swelled endlessly through the apparently empty building. Then by the huge gray stone facade, the closed shutters with only a pale light glimmering through them, the heavy varnished door and the polished knob. Luckily, it was no longer raining and his shoes weren't muddy.

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He heard muffled steps. A barred peephole opened, as in a prison, and one could guess at the pale heavy face behind it by a slight noise which was caused not by chains but by a swinging rosary. Someone looked at him in silence and finally he stammered, "May I talk to the Mother Superior?"

For a moment he was afraid and trembled. The street was deserted. He had counted on the continuation of the card game. But Monsieur Labbe might have given up his place. And Kachoudas was running a very great risk. If the haberdasher had followed him and was hidden somewhere in the shadows, he surely wouldn't hesitate, in spite of the smile of a short while ago, to add Kachoudas to the list of his victims.

"Mother Saint Ursula is in the refectory. Who shall I tell her is here?"

Good God, if only she'd open the door!

"My name wouldn't mean anything to her. Just tell her that it's something very important."

The nun's muffled steps retreated into the distance and she stayed away an infinitely long time. At last she came back and released three or four well-oiled latches.

"If you'll follow me—"

The air was warm, stale, and a trifle sugary. Everything was ivory color except for the black furniture. The silence was such that one could hear the ticking of several clocks, some of which must have been in rooms quite far away.

He did not dare sit down and he did not know how to behave. He had to wait for some time and then he jumped at the sight of an elderly nun whose approach he had not noticed.

"How old is she?" he wondered, for it is hard to guess at the age of a nun beneath her white cap.

"You asked to see me?"

He had telephoned beforehand from his shop to Monsieur Cujas, the husband of the second victim, who had a job at the Town Hall. Monsieur Cujas was still there, at the "Lost and Found" office.

"Who is calling?" Monsieur Cujas shouted impatiently.

Kachoudas had to screw up his courage before answering.

"One of the detectives with Inspector Micou. Can you tell me, Monsieur Cujas, where your wife went to school?"

To the Convent of the Immaculate Conception was the answer. He might have known that, since the victim had been described as "well educated."

"I beg your pardon, Reverend Mother—"

He stammered, feeling more uncomfortable than he had ever felt in his life.

"I'd like to see a list of all

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your former pupils who might now be sixty-three or sixty-four or ..."

"I am sixty-five years old myself."

She had a smooth rosy face and she observed him closely, toying the while with the beads of the heavy rosary that hung from her belt.

"You've had a narrow escape, Reverend Mother."

This was a rather tactless remark. He was panicky. Panicky because he felt surer and surer that he would win the twenty-thousand-franc reward.

"Mademoiselle Mollard came to school here, didn't she?"

"She was one of our most brilliant pupils."

"And Madame Cujas?"

"Desjardins, she was called as a girl."

"Tell me, Reverend Mother, were they both in the same class?"

"I was in the same class myself. That is why, during these past few weeks—"

But he could not wait to hear her answer.

"If I could have a list of all the girls who were here at that time?"

"Are you from the police?"

"No, Madame—Reverend Mother, I mean. But it amounts to the same thing. Just imagine, I know!"

"What do you know?"

"That is, I think I shall know soon ... Do you ever go out?"

"Every Monday, to the Bishop's palace."

"At what time of day?"

"At four o'clock."

"If you will be so kind as to make me the list—"

What could she be thinking? Perhaps she took him for the killer. No; she was perfectly serene.

"There aren't many of us left from that class. Quite a few have died ... and just recently."

"I know, Reverend Mother."

"Only Armandine and myself—"

"Who is Armandine, Reverend Mother?"

"Madame d'Hauterive. You must have heard of her. The rest have left town and we haven't kept up with them. I have an idea—just wait a minute."

Perhaps a nun, too, enjoys a distraction from her usual routine. After an absence of only a few minutes she came back with a yellowed picture of two rows of young girls, all wearing the same uniform and the same ribbon with a medal attached to it around their necks. And pointing to a weak-looking figure, she said, "There is Madame Labbe, the wife of the haberdasher. And this one, who's slightly crosseyed ..."

Mother Saint Ursula was quite right. Besides the haberdasher's wife there were only two members of the class still alive in the town: Mother Saint Ursula and Madame d'Hauterive.

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"Madame Labbe is very ill. I must go call on her next Saturday. That is her birthday and a group of her old school friends have always met in her sick room."

"Thank you, Reverend Mother."

The twenty thousand francs were his! Or at least they soon would be. Every one of the haberdasher's victims was in the photograph. And the only two still alive, besides Madame Labbe, were obviously those whom the killer had announced as his next and last victims.

"Thank you again, Reverend Mother. I must go immediately. Someone is waiting for me."

Perhaps his behavior wasn't entirely correct; he wasn't used to convent ways. If they took him for an oaf or a madman there wasn't much he could do about it. He thanked the Mother Superior once more, bowed, backed his way out, and started to run down the sidewalk outside so fast that he found it hard to slow up.

Twenty thousand francs! Twenty thousand francs they had promised for the killer, for the killer alone. Wasn't he entitled to more if he brought them a complete list of the victims, both past and future? Thanks to him two of them would survive for some years to come.

"Prove your case."

What if they were to say that?

"Prove it! Prove that these two persons were to be the next victims. What right have you to claim that a man like Monsieur Labbe planned to murder Mother Saint Ursula? What? Speak up!"

And yet only a bit of understanding was necessary. An understanding of why the haberdasher had drawn up his list in the first place.

I must go call on her next Saturday, the Mother Superior had said, speaking of Madame Labbe. *That is her birthday and a group of her old school friends have always met in her sick-room.*

Twenty thousand francs. Perhaps fifty thousand, perhaps more ... Madame d'Hauterive was rich and when she learned that she owed her life to a little tailor with a large family—

His wife was waiting at the front door.

"He's upstairs."

"Who's upstairs?"

"The Inspector."

"Good!" he cried, with a self-assurance to which she was not accustomed. Never had he wondered whether every man has a chance of living one glorious hour, one hour when he can live up to the best that is in him. And yet just such an hour had come.

"Good evening, Inspector. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, but I've been very busy."

That was the way! He had

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spoken in the easy-going tone of voice of the most affluent gentlemen of the Cafe de la Paix. He had not forgotten the gestures natural to his profession, but he performed them with such grace that he seemed to be juggling with the unattached pieces of the Inspector's suit.

"Tell me ... The twenty thousand francs reward ... There's no catch to it, is there?"

"Have you a little theory of your own, too?"

A little theory! A little theory, the Inspector called it! When Kachoudas had seen the killer at work with his own eyes! When he knew who the next victims would be and had just this minute left the company of one of them ...

"Listen, Inspector. If I were quite sure about the reward—"

"Well, I can tell you one thing. If you want to win it you'd better hurry up."

They didn't believe him. It was all a joke. They were making fun of him. The Inspector added, "There's someone waiting for me right now in my office. A woman. Apparently she claims the reward. They called me just now at the cafe."

"What's her name?" Kachoudas asked distrustfully.

"Does it interest you?"

"It isn't a nun, is it?"

"Why should it be a nun?"

"Does her last name have a *de* in it? Is her first name Armandine?"

He had no intention of letting his twenty thousand francs slip away from him.

"If she's neither one of those two, Inspector, she can only be telling you a fairy tale."

Then the Inspector let drop: "You ought to know who she is. She works right across the street from you."

Kachoudas listened intently with a hard expression on his face.

"She's the cleaning woman of your friend the haberdasher."

For at least two minutes the Inspector was left trussed up in an unfinished suit, which had only one sleeve and no collar, while the little tailor strode nervously up and down, and every now and then his mouth was twisted into a sarcastic smile. It was impossible. It wasn't right. He had thought of everything except that old cleaning woman. What credit did she deserve for the fact that she had access to the house and could spy on everything. She hadn't thought of the Convent of the Immaculate Conception, had she? She didn't know the names of the next victims.

"Look here, Inspector. Supposing I tell you right away ..."

But what about proof? Always that confounded matter of proof! And to think that the cleaning woman *might* have proof, even if

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they were only scraps of paper she had picked out of the garbage can.

"It's only fair, when all's said and done, that the first-comer should have the reward, isn't it?"

"Of course."

The light was on across the street, as it always was at this hour. It made only a vague circle behind the lace curtains, but one could guess at the shape of Madame Labbe's chair and her motionless white face.

"Saturday is her birthday—"

"What's that?"

"Never mind. Saturday the sixty-three to sixty-five year old survivors are scheduled to meet in her sick-room and ..."

This was not Kachoudas' hour of glory, it was his exact minute. He must hurry, on account of the cleaning woman.

"Listen, my man—"

"Twenty thousand francs, then?"

"Yes, if you—"

If he could prove it, of course.

"Look here—"

Kachoudas picked up the heavy scissors with which he had cut the cloth that was now draped so strangely around the Inspector. He opened the window and made a desperate gesture, hurling the scissors straight at the window on the other side of the street.

Then he stood perfectly still, quivering inside. The glass across the street had shattered with a tremendous noise. He had to catch his breath before a smile came over his face, a triumphant smile that a little tailor of his kind can afford only once in a lifetime. Across the street he and the Inspector could see in the chair of the haberdasher's invalid wife only a wooden head on top of a pile of rags.

"Tell me, Madame—"

"Mademoiselle, if you please."

A sour old thing, Monsieur Labbe's cleaning woman! They had brought her over from the police station and as soon as she saw her employer in handcuffs she knew that she was too late.

"You knew that Madame Labbe was dead, did you?"

"I was sure of it."

"For how long a time?"

"Months and months. I was sure, that is, without really knowing—"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, mostly on account of the fish—"

"What fish?"

"All kinds of fish—herring, halibut, cod ... She couldn't eat fish."

"Why not?"

"Fish upset her. Lots of people are like that. If I don't get at least a share of the twenty thousand francs, then there's no justice—"

Kachoudas stirred in his corner, but the Inspector made a reassuring sign in his direction.

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"What was that about the fish?"

"Well, one day when I had cooked some fish for him and I wanted to send up some meat to his wife, he told me that I needn't bother. He took all her meals to her, you know, and kept her room in order. Then there was the string—"

"What string?"

"The string I found last week when I was cleaning up his workshop. He never wanted me to go in there, but I made up my mind to do it while he was away, because there was such a bad smell. Back of the hats I found a string hanging from the ceiling. He pulled on that to make the same noise that his wife used to make when she tapped with her cane on the floor. As for the twenty thousand francs, I'm going to see a lawyer—"

Kachoudas almost rose again. Monsieur Labbe gave a dignified smile.

"So first of all you killed your wife—"

He shrugged.

"You strangled her the same way you did the others—"

"Not the same way, Inspector. With my hands. She was suffering too much."

"Or rather, you were tired of looking after her—"

"As you like—"

"Then you began to kill off your wife's friends. Why? And why in such rapid succession?"

Kachoudas raised his hand as if he were at school.

"Because of the birthday!" he shouted.

"Quiet, please," said the Inspector. "Let Monsieur Labbe talk."

Monsieur Labbe nodded approvingly at the little tailor.

"Exactly. He's quite right. They all had to be killed before next Saturday ..."

And he winked at Kachoudas. There was no doubt about it: he winked at him as if he were an accomplice. It was just as if he were saying, "They'll always blunder along. But we two—we understand each other."

And the little tailor, who had just won his twenty thousand francs, could not help smiling back.

... *for they shall inherit the earth.*

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a *NEW* crime-detective story by

ROBERT TWOHY

Mrs. Kane (she was really Mrs. Pamela Kendall) came to San Francisco to get away from the world—actually, to get away from one man in the world. She rented a quiet little house, isolated from any neighbors—a house to which a man might come without being observed . . . and waited . . .

MRS. KENDALL'S TRUNK

by ROBERT TWOHY

On her second day in San Francisco, Mrs. Kendall succeeded in renting a little frame house on a hilltop, in an area known as Sunlit Heights.

The landlord, Mr. Peet, old and thin, with a dry, disembodied cough, seemed somewhat in a daze as he conducted her through the house.

"Never thought I'd leave this place. I've lived here thirty-five years. Thirty-five years! . . . And now, all of a sudden, this respiration thing—suddenly I can't smell, can't taste, got this palpitation . . ." He put a leaflike hand to his chest. "Almost blacked out last week. Doctor told me, Jake, you got to get out of the fog. And pronto. Got to go where it's warm—otherwise, you'll be a dead man in three months."

She made a vague sound of sympathy. He went on, "I wouldn't rent to a couple with kids. Never." He gave a kind of shudder. "Kids . . . never leave things alone, house'd be a wreck. But you, now you look like a lady leads a quiet life, who'll take care of things. Rather than rent to the wrong kind, I'd rather not rent at all."

Suddenly he looked alarmed. "Though that's bad too. You leave a house empty, and sooner or later vandals are going to start messing around. No, I sure don't want to leave the house vacant."

She was at the front window looking down over the area. On

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the slopes beneath her were modest little homes of workingmen. So different it all was from the old neighborhood in Chicago, with its large homes and expensive, professionally maintained lawns. Paul would never find her here.

But of course he would. She knew it. He would trace her no matter where she went, no matter how she tried to lose herself in unfamiliar settings. A few weeks, a few months—and one day he would be climbing the porch steps, pushing the doorbell . . .

"Mrs. Kane?"

"What?" It took her a few seconds to react to the false name she had used since coming to San Francisco.

"How long would you want the house?"

She said vaguely, "I'm not sure. Perhaps several months."

"That would be good. I might get well in a hurry, and then I'd be wanting to move back."

He broke off to cough into his handkerchief. "Let me show you the cellar. No leak, no seepage—a wonderful storage place."

She said, "I don't have a great deal to store." But he had turned away, and so she followed his bent, shuffling form out the front room and to a door next to the kitchen.

Twisting a bolt, he opened the door, flicked on a light switch, and led her down a flight of wooden steps. Like the rest of the house, the cement cellar was clean and shipshape, with an old-style furnace in one corner, and near it some old lumber and bricks, neatly stacked. Against a far wall, one on top of another, and a third alongside, were three huge trunks, with brass corners, brass padlocks, and metal straps around.

Mrs. Kendall gazed at the trunks, and suddenly again thought of Paul. Relentless Paul . . .

"Look at those cement foundation walls," said Mr. Peet, gazing pridefully. "Look at the bars bolted over that little window. Nobody's going to be breaking into *this* cellar! I built the whole house myself, thirty-five years ago. Picked this hilltop because I like privacy—those days I had the area to myself. 'Course, the neighbors are creeping up the hill now—since the tract went in, three years ago. But there's still some breathing room."

She murmured, "I'd like a trunk like those."

"You would?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I have some—some china, quite valuable, an inheritance, that I'd like to store in a good safe place—"

"Nothing safer than this cellar. I'd let you use one of mine, but they're all full of metal, gears and such. I used to be in the scrap metal business. But I've got this friend who's a hauler, and

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he's got a couple of trunks like these. He'd sell you one."

She was quiet a moment, staring at the trunks. Paul was a man of average height. Stood on end, each of the trunks would be taller than she ...

Back in the front room she sat on the couch, her purse in her lap. "Should I give you the money for the trunk?"

"No, I'll have my friend bring it out and you can pay him. It'll run maybe twenty dollars, somewhere around there."

"Very well." She was indifferent to the cost. Money was the least of her problems. With several thousand dollars in cash in her purse and over $200,000 in banks in Chicago ...

He now stood at the window, his seamed face slack, as he gazed down the slope. "Thirty-five years. Seems like a dream, me blacking out, going to the doctor last week, and him telling me that about my health ... I don't have any choice, though. I've *got* to go."

She murmured, "You told me."

"Like a dream. Like I'm walking in a dream. Don't know how I'll like apartment life. But the doctor says I've got to get down the Peninsula where there isn't the fog. My oldest girl has this apartment in Menlo Park, so I'll move in with her. Don't know, though. Living alone, you get used to your own way—"

Her voice cut briskly through his reminiscence. "I'm sure it's a wrench for you to leave. Well, thank you for everything." She rose and walked with him to the front door.

He paused. "If it's all right with you I'll just stop by every couple of weeks or so. It'll give me something to do, to come back, look over the house, the neighborhood."

She watched from the window as his dusty old sedan cautiously maneuvered down the steep street. Now, she thought, I have a little house, all by itself on a hilltop, with a cellar ... and I'm going to have a trunk. A large trunk—with brass corners and metal straps and a strong brass lock.

She murmured aloud, "Don't find me, Paul. For your sake, don't find me."

Six months before, a Chicago detective-lieutenant named Broyles had stared at the man slumped in the leather chair in the study that was hung with rifles and pistols, and had felt uneasy. Gun-cleaning accidents involving gentlemen who left rather large sums of money to attractive widows always made Broyles feel uneasy.

The bullet had struck Roger Kendall under the chin and blown off the top of his head.

According to her calm account, the widow had been asleep in the bedroom down the hall when, at precisely five minutes past midnight—a time corroborated by per-

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sons in two adjoining homes—she heard the shot, ran to the study, and found her gun-collector husband dead.

The detective's strong hunch was that the lady was a murderess—but hunches were worth nothing; without a shred of evidence against her he didn't have a case.

He would have been interested in a conversation which took place one afternoon shortly after the inheritance was settled. The scene was the living room of the Kendall home and the participants were the widow and a young man named Paul Barton, who was her late husband's nephew.

"What are you going to do with all your money, Pam?" Paul was nonchalantly sipping vodka-and-tonic—his sixth or eighth drink of the day. As he cheerfully admitted, he sustained himself on vodka.

She said coldly, "I don't think that question is in very good taste."

"I suppose not. But let me ask you this—was it very good taste to murder Uncle Roger?"

She whispered, after a long silence, "You're drunk, Paul!"

"Granted. But I wasn't drunk when I saw you at a quarter to twelve on the night of the killing. I saw things very clearly then."

He sat, legs sprawled out, relaxed, smiling amiably, cracking ice with his teeth, a sophomoric habit he had never outgrown. "Remember, Pam? I came here that night about 8:00 o'clock. I was loaded. You were about to go out—to the public library, as I remember. You left the house. I sat with Uncle Roger in the study, harangued him into lending me some money—which he did. To get rid of me. Then I passed out."

He sipped his drink. "Collapsed like a drunken hog on the rug at his feet. He got me up. I said, 'Don't bother to see me out.' He didn't. I closed the study door, started toward the front door, and just kept walking down the hall to the guest room. It seemed like a sound idea at the time. I dropped on the bed, had a comfy snooze, woke up feeling my old self again, whatever that is—and then I heard movement in the hall. You. You were home."

"There's no secret about it. I was home by nine."

"Yes. Too bad you didn't know *I* was there, in the guest room. If you *had* known, poor Uncle Roger would have lived—for another night, anyhow."

She lit a cigarette, staring at him. "Why should I believe you were in the house at all?"

"Let me go on. I continued to lie there, dozing, and then I dropped off again—and suddenly came awake. I looked at my watch—a quarter to twelve. The night was still young, I had con-

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valesced, I had money in my pocket, there were bright lights to see, bright bottles to conquer. So I opened the door to the hall. I saw you, walking away from me, down that long carpeted hall, towards the study. Wearing your green negligee, with woolly green slippers—there's your proof I was here.

"I stood in the guest-room door and watched you go down the hall, past the front-door entrance, and then into the study. I watched the study door close. Then I came down the hall. I turned at the front door, quietly opened it, and slipped out into the night."

Pam Kendall said, after a long silence, "So, actually, you saw nothing."

"Nothing of the murder, no. What I *did* see, though, was you going into the study twenty minutes before you said you had—twenty minutes before the shot was fired, that was supposed to have awakened you. I think, Pam, that it would be enough to put you behind bars for a long, long time."

He cracked ice with his teeth, grinning at her. "What you did, I suppose, was to bring him a nightcap, with some kind of drug slipped into it, so he was passed out in his chair before you returned twenty minutes later. Then it was a simple matter to lift one of the guns from the wall, slide a shell in, put it in position as if he were cleaning it, take the glass away and wash it, do whatever other stage-managing you had to do—then, with due regard for fingerprints, squeeze the trigger ..."

She got up and paced in front of the fireplace. Staring at the cold logs she said, "Why didn't you tell the police right away?"

"Oh, I thought I'd just wait—until the inheritance was safely in your hands."

She turned and said scornfully, "If you think I'd pay blackmail—"

He smiled. "You'll pay, Pam. You have no choice."

They settled on a sum. But she should have known. He had no income. A matter of a few months, living as he did, and the money would be gone.

He came again. She said, as she drew cash from her desk drawer, "This is the last time, Paul. Don't come again."

But he did. Leaving off the playboy charm he said harshly, "Give me money. I'm broke, some people are pressing me. I'm desperate."

His hands were bunched, his eyes were hard, glazed. She looked at him, then went silently to her desk.

She said, as she paid him, "I'm leaving, Paul. I'm going to close the house, and leave Chicago for a while. Don't look for me."

She left a week later after telling her friends and acquaintances a tale of going off on a Euro-

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pean vacation. She took the plane to San Francisco. She thought, "When he finds me gone he may let it go at that. May look elsewhere for support. I hope so."

But—did she? She smiled slightly. It would have been easy enough to really go to Europe. Instead, she went to San Francisco under a false name—Mrs. Kane. Why? Because she knew that even under the assumed name Paul would eventually find her?

She had no definite plan. But she knew that in San Francisco she would look for a quiet little house, isolated from any neighbors—a house to which a man might come without being observed—to which it need never be known if a man had come or not ...

Three days after she had rented Mr. Peet's house, her trunk arrived in the custody of two strong solemn men who got it off the pickup truck, carried through the house, and down into the cellar.

They gave her a key, took her money, and departed.

Mrs. Kendall turned the key in the lock and pushed back the heavy lid. Standing there she gazed into the open black trunk.

"Come anytime now, Paul."

A week passed. Then, early one afternoon, there were sudden footsteps on the porch. Quick light steps—not the shuffling steps of old Mr. Peet. The bell rang.

She opened the door. "I've been expecting you."

Paul smiled his crooked smile. "It's a hot day, and I've had a hard plane trip and a long cab ride. Any vodka in the house?"

She watched the cab that had deposited him make a U-turn, then drive away down the slope. Then she led the way to the kitchen. He watched her pour vodka from the bottle, and grapefruit juice from a can she opened, over ice.

He murmured, "Would you be so good as to taste it for me, Pam?"

He watched her take a long swallow of the drink. Then he took the glass from her, and walked with her into the front room.

He sat down on the couch, and she sat opposite him. He sipped his drink and said, "This will be the last time, I swear it. Give me ten thousand. I'll leave the country, go to Canada or somewhere, make a new life—"

Her eyes were fixed on him. "Tell me how you found me."

He smiled, and chipped ice with his teeth. "I followed you the day you left Chicago, to the airport. I saw you board the San Francisco flight. I have a friend in San Francisco, an insurance investigator, and I asked him to meet the plane at the airport and follow you. I sent him money for his time, of course. He followed you

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to your hotel, and the next morning he was watching when you went to the real-estate office. It was easy for him to find out the address of the house you rented."

"So you knew from the day I moved in what my address was. Very resourceful, Paul. You had me on tap for whenever you needed me ... Does your friend know you came here to see me?"

"What?" His voice was a little slurred. He took a bit of ice from his mouth and dropped it into the glass.

"Didn't you hear me? I asked if your friend knows you came to see me."

"No, no, he doesn't know I'm in town. No business of his."

"Do you know that I bought a trunk?"

He put his hand to his head. "What?"

"A trunk. It's in the cellar."

His face had gone suddenly slack. His eyes were dull. He said thickly, "What's happening? There's a blur—"

She got up and came close to him. He had fallen back on the couch, and his knees trembled violently, as if trying to thrust him to his feet. His eyes flickered, and behind them she saw fear, as realization forced itself into his consciousness.

She said, "A sleeping potion, quite strong. In the ice cube. A special ice tray, Paul, prepared and waiting for you. That was always an annoying habit of yours—biting the ice ... You really shouldn't have come. I *did* warn you, Paul."

He said weakly, "Pam. For the love of God!"

She stood there, smiling down at him, and then she said, "You're asleep now. Unfortunately you'll wake up ... poor Paul!"

Pamela Kendall was not big, but she was strong enough. Strong enough to drag his inert form from the couch and across the room to the cellar steps. Then it didn't take strength—only a hard prod with her foot to send him down the steps.

She looked at him, lying at the bottom, blood oozing from his cut forehead. But he wasn't dead. He would still wake up—one more time.

She dragged him to the trunk, and, as if he were a rolled-up rug, lifted him over the edge one part at a time—first head, then shoulders, then torso, then hips. She tumbled his legs in and closed the heavy lid. She turned the key in the padlock and went upstairs.

Passing the mirror in the hall she saw her dark hair clinging to her glistening cheeks. "I must take a shower," she said softly. "A tepid shower—then I'll be myself again."

She stood under the shower, and in the rush of water, imagined she heard, over and over, a thin faint cry ...

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And now she must think of what to do about the trunk.

But there was really no hurry. Paul was dead, dead in the cellar, above which she slept.

... She rose suddenly, in the bright sunlight, her heart beating wildly. What was it? Oh, yes—a recollection. Of course. Mr. Peet. He had said that he would be coming by every couple of weeks or so.

Well, she would simply pretend not to be home. There were only two doors, front and back, and each had a twist-knob lock. She would turn the knobs and even with his keys he could not get in—

But what about smell?

She got up, put on her robe, and went into the kitchen to make coffee. One always thought more clearly with coffee.

Well, smell then. She did not know. She imagined that in a week or so—but the house was isolated, and on a hilltop. Industrial plants were not far—refineries, meat-packing plants. If anyone *should* notice a peculiar odor in the air, would he not attribute it to the factories? And why should anyone think of *her* house? Quite isolated, no one came around—except Mr. Peet, of course, and what had he said? "... This respiration thing—I can't smell, can't taste."

She smiled with relief. There was no need even to keep him out. He could go down into the cellar if he wished, he could make himself at home. No, there was no danger at all.

She got up, went to the cellar door, stood there, staring down at the mute black trunk. Could he still be alive in there? No, of course not. There wasn't enough air to have lasted an hour.

But she walked down the stairs, turned the key in the lock, and raised the lid—to be sure ...

Then she locked it again and returned to the kitchen to her cup of bracing coffee. So there was really no danger. And she would think of a plan for disposing of the trunk—some clever plan that would, perhaps, cause the trunk to be delivered to another state, delivery to be made in such a way that it could never be traced back to her. In the meantime, she could feel peace—for the first time in the months since Paul had first spoken to her of what he had seen.

She heard a car slither up to the house.

Mr. Peet, of course—no one else would come. And he was no danger.

But two men in dark suits stood in the doorway.

"Mrs. Kane?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Detective Miles, and this is Sergeant Williams. We have a warrant."

She stared. "A warrant?"

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"Yes." He showed her a paper. "To search your cellar."

She whispered, hand at her throat, "What are you talking about?"

"We hear there's a body. A body in a trunk."

She felt she must be going mad.

She heard her own strange voice: "You couldn't have known. There's no way you could have known!"

They had followed her into the front room. She felt as if she were crumbling, her body, her face ... "Who told you? Who?"

"Mr. Peet."

Clutching her face she cried, "He was here yesterday? Spying on me? He saw me put Paul in the trunk?"

They were silent, staring. Then Sergeant Williams pushed his hat to the back of his head and said softly, "Holy Mother of God!"

Miles took Pamela Kendall's shoulders, not roughly, but firmly, and backed her toward the couch. "You'd better sit down ... The old man has been talking in his sleep. His daughter heard him. She'd suspected anyway. Suspected that Florence Peet—not her mother, but her stepmother—hadn't really gone off to Scotland on a visit, as old Peet had told everyone, and died there. He had letters in her handwriting, they looked authentic, but the daughter always thought there was something fishy ... Anyway, after she heard what he said in his sleep she persuaded him to come to us and confess."

"Confess? Confess what?"

"That he'd clubbed Florence Peet to death five years ago and put her body in one of the trunks in his cellar."

Mrs. Kendall stared at them.

Then she closed her eyes, and lay back on the couch.

Her strange, wild laughter went on and on ...

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by JOHN DICKSON CARR

With copy soon due at the printer's, once more your obedient servant sits down at the typewriter in a mood of unusual benevolence. And why not? Could Scrooge himself have resisted any month which brought him two unusual detective stories, one galloping mystery of the turf, and one espionage-type thriller with fireworks all the way? Wouldn't he have sent Bob Cratchit a turkey in summer as well as at Christmas? Indeed, your correspondent feels less like Scrooge than like Bob Cratchit or even (Dickens's) Tiny Tim. A thousand pardons; it won't happen too often.

Did I say *unusual* detective stories? Even so. There may be those who argue that **Cop Out,** by Ellery Queen (World, $4.95) is not a detective story at all. If they say this, however, they will mean only that for his fortieth anniversary Ellery Queen, the author, has not been content merely to give us the mixture as before.

Though Ellery as a character is absent from this one, which at first glance may seem like *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark, you will find detection in plenty after two visiting hoods, brutal Hinch and the vicious, repulsive Furia, together with Goldie, Furia's girl, heist a factory payroll and shoot down its branch manager in the town of New Bradford. With the news broadcast and the heat on to prevent immediate getaway, the hoods find themselves pitted against Wes Malone, an honest cop in whose hands they leave the payroll, abducting his small daughter as insurance for his good behavior.

Thenceforward, throughout the sensational battle between the hoods and our honest cop, you will find more than one twist of mystery; you will also find suspense in the best meaning of that overused, often misunderstood word. There has been no finer feat of storytelling even from Ellery Queen.

In **Picture of Guilt,** by Michael Innes (Dodd, Mead, $3.95), those who have followed the career of Sir John Appleby—he began, thirty odd years ago, as plain Inspector Appleby of Scotland Yard—can watch the now-retired Police Commissioner at his suave, devious best. There is no murder mystery to be solved, in itself a striking circumstance. But certain art masterpieces (mainly paintings, though they include one highly

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indecorous statue) have been disappearing in a whole series of striking thefts or frauds against those moneyed eccentrics with whom England, in fact as well as fiction, still abounds.

Who has been doing all this? We know, of course, it must be some character we have met face to face, but which one? So persuasively does Mr. Innes pile incident on incident, with skill, picturesqueness, a touch of the raffish, that he holds us hyonotized until violence at last explodes on the river at Oxford. Finally, though the clues are there, be very careful. One of them is almost too plain to be seen.

At the beginning of **Forfeit,** by Dick Francis (Harper & Row, $4.95), a drunken sportswriter falls to death in Fleet Street. Before it has ended with the running of the classic steeplechase called the Lamplighter Gold Cup, James Tyrone, racing correspondent for a sensational London newspaper, has endured as much as he or the reader can bear on the track of some gigantic swindle which threatens the whole turf as well as threatening both his invalid wife and his anything but invalid Afro-English mistress.

The author, himself formerly a champion jockey who almost won the Grand National, has the knack of being both sensational and plausible. He makes us believe what he tells; he makes us sympathize with the right people; he shows, after all the uproar, that there need be no essential conflict between wife and mistress. A writer who can prove that could prove anything, but then Mr. Francis is as gifted a writer as he must remain a gifted horseman. From this corner loud cheers.

Whether or not you have yet met Modesty Blaise, another British secret agent and the female James Bond, she is at full stretch every which way in Peter O'Donnell's **A Taste for Death** (Doubleday, $4.95). A beautiful sex-bomb with much amorous skill, Modesty also excels at any form of combat armed and unarmed, whether she takes out the American torpedo lying in wait with his sub-machinegun or is matched against an Austrian master swordsman for their murderous fencing bout in the Sahara Desert.

In this romp—well, the publishers call it a romp—Modesty and her partner but not boyfriend, knife-wielding Willie Garvin, do battle with a pair of horrendous villains directed by a still more horrendous villain in the background. Though we meet no espionage here, tactics and atmosphere are so like those of the spy thriller that it belongs in this category. In conclusion, then, a prejudice: if I can't have a spectacular fair-play murder mystery with a thunderbolt surprise ending, give me the wildest cloak-and-dagger saga and I am happy. Judo-throwing or no, if you travel with Modesty I think you will be happy too.

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a NEW short story by

CELIA FREMLIN

A "haunter" ... Celia Fremlin has a special touch—a very special touch—for this type of story; indeed, we know of no one else who conceives and executes this rara avis of the "pure" mystery as well as Celia Fremlin ... Do you believe in angels? We mean real *angels ...*

WITH A RUSTLE OF WINGS

by CELIA FREMLIN

"BUT THERE ARE ANGELS, MUMmy. Miss Sowerby says there are. She says they have wings, too, and bright lights round their heads. *Ever* so bright! As bright as the headlights on Daddy's car, Miss Sowerby says!"

I sighed. Bother Miss Sowerby! And bother Daddy, too, for that matter! If Philip wanted his son to be brought up in his own humanist-rationalist opinions, then what was the sense in sending him to an old-fashioned little village school where the last of the world's Miss Sowerbys are bound to be still quietly flourishing?

But of course I would never argue about it: right from the moment of marrying Philip I had resolved never to argue with him about Simon's upbringing. The important things for a six-year-old —or so I reasoned—were consistency, continuity, stability. The task of a new stepmother, it seemed to me, was to keep things going for the child as close as possible to what they had always been. No change was as important as *no change,* if you see what I mean; and this had been my policy throughout these first difficult months.

And difficult, indeed, they had been. It would have been easier if Simon had been, quite simply, a more attractive child—if he had been a bouncing, handsome, extravert little boy, who could be made happy by candy and toys and ice cream; a little boy with

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muddy knees and football boots and lots of noisy little friends. I had come into my marriage all set to be tolerant about that sort of thing—to smile as I patched torn dungarees, swept mud off the carpets, and accustomed my ears to the clatter and yells of Cowboys and Indians in and out of the back door.

But Simon isn't like that at all, I am sorry to say. He is a pale, mopish little creature, who reads a lot—yes, at six he reads voraciously, as fluently as an adult; his eyes are always red-rimmed, sometimes from eyestrain, sometimes, I suppose, from crying. Personally, I think he oughtn't to be *allowed* to read so much; but as I say, I never interfere; I keep my opinions to myself.

If he was *my* child—that is to say, if I was his real mother, and didn't have to be so careful all the time not to upset him—I would *insist* on him going out more and leading a more active life. I would take him for long walks whether he liked it or not; I would invite little boys to the house myself, and make him play with them. I just couldn't endure to see a son of *mine* so pallid and unsociable, and so full of fancies. But since he *isn't* my son, and since Philip seems to see nothing amiss, I let him go his own way, and just try to be very, very kind to him.

I think I can honestly say that in all these months I have never once slapped him, or even raised my voice in anger. All my friends say it's marvelous, how patient I am with him, even when he is at his most whiny and tiresome; and I am glad to be told this because, believe me, I don't always *feel* patient! There are times, there really are, when Simon would try the patience of an angel, particularly when he is in one of his argumentative moods.

Of course, I know that six-year-olds are always argumentative—I'm not complaining of that—it's right and natural that they should be. But with Simon it's different. With him it's not the normal, aggressive "I'm right and you're wrong!" sort of attitude that is typical of bright little boys. On the contrary, it's as if he doesn't *want* you to be wrong—is afraid of it, somehow—and he's all twisted up with anxiety to put you in the right.

Like this angel business, for instance. They have religious instruction on Friday afternoons, and on this particular Friday it seems that Miss Sowerby had seen fit to stuff the kids' heads with even more fairy-tale nonsense than usual. Of course, it should have slid off him like water off a duck's back as soon as the lesson was over—that's what happens with any normal child. But Simon is not like that. Perhaps for the very reason that he has been

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brought up in an atheistic household, all this claptrap actually *means* something to him. He actually *listens,* I mean, and thinks he is learning some new and extraordinary facts about the world; a child from an ordinary religious home would never dream of paying that much attention.

And so, being Simon, he comes home all bothered and anxious about it, and lets his tea grow cold, and the nice hot-buttered toast that I always have ready for him on winter afternoons congeals on his plate while he worries at the topic like a terrier with a bone.

"But, Mummy, they've got great big *wings,* Miss Sowerby says, as big as—as big as right across this room! That's how big they'd have to be, to fly an angel right off the floor!"

His eyes were round with awe as they took in the size of our sitting room and visualized the wing span that would reach from wall to wall. This solemn, objective assessment of such a piece of fantasy made me want to laugh; but of course I was careful not to do so; one should never laugh at a child.

"No, Simon," I said gently. "You've got the wrong idea. Miss Sowerby didn't mean there really *are* such things as angels." She did, of course, the silly cow, but what else could I say? "She just meant that—well, that you can *imagine* such creatures, as symbols of goodness. You know what a 'symbol' is?"

He did, of course. Simon always knows the meanings of words. I sometimes think he'd be a more lovable child if he didn't—and a happier one, too. Already that irritating little nervous pucker was coming and going on his forehead as he talked—a sure sign that he was working himself up into one of his states. I don't ever let him see that it irritates me, of course, because I know he can't help it. So I just smiled at him reassuringly and said, "That's all angels are, Simon, just a fanciful way of talking about goodness. You mustn't start thinking about them as if they were *real.*"

But Simon wouldn't let it go. He gets his nerves wound round something the way a spider's web catches a fly, and there is nothing you can do.

"No," he said, with his own special air of anxiety-ridden obstinacy. "That isn't what Miss Sowerby meant. She meant there *are* angels. She says you can see them sometimes. People who are very, very good, *they* can see them, she says. Am *I* very, very good, Mummy?"

I sighed. I could see that it was hopeless.

"Of course you are, Simon dear," I said brightly—and I wasn't lying, either. He *is* a good little boy—too good. Naughty lit-

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tle boys are more lovable, to my way of thinking.

"*Of course* you're good!" I repeated reassuringly. "Very, very good! We'll tell Daddy how good you've been, shall we, when he comes home?"

"No!" Astonishingly, the little pallid face was puckered almost into tears, and I was filled with a familiar, baffled irritation. Here I was trying my hardest to be extra-nice to him, to show approval, and all he did was to look as if I'd kicked him. "No, don't tell Daddy that!" he begged, clutching at my sleeve with his weak, damp little fingers. "Please don't tell Daddy I'm good! *Please* Mummy!"

When you can't understand something, the thing to do is to smile, and be very, very kind. So I patted the perverse little creature's head—his hair is always a little greasy, and unpleasant to the touch however often I wash it. I smiled my brightest and suggested a game of checkers before bedtime. It's a boring game, made let Simon win; but it's the sort even more boring for me by the fact that I always play so as to of sedentary game that seems to suit him, and as I'm only playing for his sake anyway, it doesn't matter that I'm bored.

Well, his bedtime came at last, and he went off meekly enough; and Philip came home, and we had dinner; and it wasn't until we were sitting in front of the fire drinking our coffee that a sudden shriek of "Mummy! Mummy!" sent me racing up the stairs.

Believe it or not, it was the angels again! Apparently that fool of a Miss Sowerby had told the kids that if they were really good children an angel would watch over them at night while they slept. And Simon—trust him!—had managed to convert this fantastic nonsense into a vision of terror! It seemed that he had had a dream—or had let his imagination run riot in the darkness—there was no way of telling which; but anyway, he had opened his eyes and fancied he saw a circle of light in the half-open doorway, and had heard a rustle of wings.

"It was coming up the stairs, Mummy!" he gasped, half in and half out of his nightmare. "It was coming in the door! It was all bright, and I could hear its wings rustling!"

I soothed him as best I could; and then Philip came up and talked to him too, telling him all the comforting rationalist doctrine about things not being real unless scientists have measured them and taken photographs of them and that sort of thing; and gradually Simon became calmer, and presently he fell asleep, a secure, cared-for little boy, with one of his parents on each side of his bed, just as it should be.

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The rightness of this picture struck both of us; and when we got down to the sitting room Philip put his arms around me and told me how marvelous I was with Simon. "He's *ours* now, isn't he?" he said, covering my face with kisses. "Not just *mine*. *Our* son! And did you notice how he called for Mummy tonight? Not for Daddy? He has really accepted you at last."

It was true; it really was a step forward. At the beginning Simon had balked at calling me Mummy—it almost seemed that he must still remember something of his real mother, who had died when he was three. We hadn't forced him, of course—that would have been wrong. We had simply and firmly referred to me as Mummy—Philip in talking of me in his presence, and I in referring to myself, and at last Simon had got used to it. And now, here he was calling out to Mummy for comfort in the night. It was one of my moments of triumph.

But I have to admit that as night followed night, this sense of triumph began to wear a little thin. Because it turned out that Simon's nightmare that evening—or hysterical fancy, or whatever it was—was not just an isolated little episode, to be laughed off and forgotten; it was the beginning of a long and wearying obsession which was to try my patience to the limit.

At first it was just in the evenings. Around nine o'clock, just as it had been the first time, the cry "Mummy! Mummy!" would ring down the stairs; and I would have to leave my coffee, or my book, and run up to calm him down. Over and over again, evening after evening, I found myself mouthing the same soothing rigmarole: "But, Simon dear, there *can't* be such things as angels." "No, dear, there *wasn't* an angel standing by your bed when I came in." "No, dear, it *isn't* true that anyone has ever seen one, it's just a story." "No, I *can't* hear a rustling sound, only the wind in the trees; and no, that light *isn't* coming from the stairs, it's only the moon outside the window. No, it *isn't* getting brighter."

Each night it seemed to take longer before he settled down; each night I had a harder struggle to hide my impatience and irritation. And my scorn, too, really; a boy, even a *little* boy, should surely have more pride than to give way so helplessly to such idle fancies. Not that I ever suggested such a thing to the child, or urged him to be "a brave boy," as I would have done if he had been *my* son, and I had needed to be proud of him. I knew, you see, that he couldn't help it; he'd been born with these morbid and cowardly tendencies, and all one could do was to be sorry for him,

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not angry or reproachful. Anger, or any sort of disapproval, would only have made him worse, the poor spiritless little thing.

But it *was* a strain, and I don't mind admitting it; and instead of getting better as the days went by it got worse. Presently he began waking up during the night too, as well as in the evenings. I would have to drag myself from my bed and go in to him at one in the morning, or at two, or three. Shivering in my dressing gown, half dead with drowsiness, I would stand at his bedside and recite the familiar sentences almost in my sleep: "No, Simon dear, there *can't* be such things as angels. No, there *isn't* a rustling noise coming up the stairs."

Sometimes, to give me a rest, Philip would go to him instead of me: but all that happened then was that Simon would go on crying "Mummy! Mummy!" until finally I had to go in too. Quite often, actually, he would do the same with me—I mean, he would go on crying "Mummy! Mummy!" even after I was already there and doing my best to soothe him. It was puzzling, this: but Simon *is* a puzzling child, as I am sure I have made clear be now.

Time went by, and my nights grew more hideous with weariness and broken sleep; and now Simon's obsession began to spill over into the daytime as well. He began searching our bookshelves for references to angels, and one evening, coming on a picture of an angel in some book or other—a book on medieval history, I think it was—he said something so odd that it really gave me quite a shock.

"Look, Mummy!" he exclaimed, bringing the book over to me. "Look, this one hasn't got a beak!"

"A beak?" I said, mystified; and it turned out—would you believe it?—that he had all this time been imagining that angels had *beaks*! Because they had wings—that was the connection in his mind—and he'd pictured their beaks as huge and curved, like a vulture's. He thought they had vulture's eyes, too—hooded eyes, peering out from under their haloes and gauzy draperies and whatnot. Oh, and claws, too, where their hands should be. Can you credit it? An intelligent child of nearly seven!

Well, you might suppose—you who don't know our Simon—you might suppose that the discovery that angels don't have beaks and claws would have dispelled the nightmares. But oh, no! He decided—with his usual obstinacy—that the *picture* was wrong!—just as he'd decided that *we* were wrong in saying there weren't such things as angels at all. It was no use arguing—it never is, with him; and to be fair, I have to admit that people who say

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there aren't such things as angels are on rather shaky ground when they start saying also that angels haven't got beaks.

So the nightmares continued; and the crying out in the night; and the daytime obsession grew, if anything, worse. He began about this time to make dreary little attempts to be naughty—Miss Sowerby's fatuous assertion that it was only the "very, very good" children who were liable to see angels at their bedside—this seemed to be fixed in his mind forever, and nothing would dislodge it.

So he took the admittedly logical course of trying to be naughty. I say "trying," because he was far too timid and anxious a child ever to bring it off. He would take a cup or a saucer and tap it feebly against the kitchen floor trying to break it—but not daring, you understand, *really* to break it, by banging it hard. Or he would play truant from school—for five minutes, hanging about in the lane—and then run in, crying, and not even late for prayers!

And still—though I say it myself—I kept my temper. Philip said I was an angel of patience—it was only his praise and encouragement that made it possible for me to carry on, I feel sure of that. Thanks to him, I stuck it out, night after night, shivering at Simon's bedside, swallowing my impatience and resentment, never letting it show in my voice or in my face, or in the gentle touch of my hand as I stroked his hot little forehead and his horrid greasy hair.

One night, after Simon had called me up three times, it seemed silly to go back to bed; he would only call me again. So I went downstairs and sat by the dead fire, with my head in my hands, and my dressing gown pulled tight around me against the cold. My head drooped with weariness, my eyelids were heavy like two stones; and upstairs—asleep, I hoped—lay the little slave driver who had established the right to keep me from my rest forever. The sickly, neurotic little beast, the morbid loathsome little milksop, the apple of his father's eye ....

"Mummy! Mummy!"

The cry woke me: that's how I knew that I had been asleep. They were only dreams, then, those dark unruly thoughts which ordinarily I would never think. I still seemed to be half dreaming as I stumbled up the stairs; my eyes seemed dazzled, as if by a great light; and yet everything was in darkness. My dressing gown had grown longer, somehow, and heavier; it rustled stiffly behind me, catching softly on the stairs as I went up.

"Mummy! Mummy!" More and more urgent came the cry.

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"I'm coming!" I called out, and began to summon up the soothing, comforting smile I always forced onto my face for Simon.

But why wouldn't the smile come? What was this stiffness where my lips should be? I tried to open my mouth to call out again; but it was not my mouth that opened—it was a great beak, jutting out of my face, cruel and curved like a bird of prey's; and I knew now that my eyelids, so heavy with lack of sleep, were heavy and hooded above my yellow vulture's eyes. My robes were round me like a mist.

The dazzle in my eyes grew brighter, and now I knew that it came from within; my beaked face was blazing, bright as the headlights on Daddy's car, and in that awful radiance I could see that my hands had become claws, yellow and crooked as they clutched the railing. They looked eager, somehow, as they pulled me upward and onward, compensating for my useless clawed feet that clattered and slithered on the polished stairs.

"Mummy! Mummy!"

"I'm coming, dear, I'm coming!" I called—but how harsh and eerie the words sounded as the beak mouthed them, clumsily; so I tried again.

"I'm coming!" I squawked; and with a final clumsy spurt I slithered and rattled on my claws across the landing. With a rustle of half-raised wings I swooped into Simon's darkened room and leaned over his little bed . . .

NEXT MONTH . . .

11 *NEW* short stories — including

A. H. Z. CARR's *The Options of Timothy Merkle*
MARGERY ALLINGHAM's *The Lying-in-State Affair*
JEAN ANOUILH's *The Moment Is Near*
EDWARD D. HOCH's *The Spy and the Shopping List Code*

2 First Prize Winners —

CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG's *The Enemy*
THOMAS FLANAGAN's *The Cold Winds of Adesta*

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Alan K. Young's first story—"Letter from Mindoro," in the March 1968 issue of EQMM—introduced Ponsonby, Briarwood College's Professor of English emeritus, in that surprisingly rare form of the detective-riddle, the code story. In Mr. Young's second story—"Reflection on Murder," EQMM, October 1968—Professor Ponsonby became a series character and a full-fledged code consultant. And now Mr. Young gives us Ponsonby's third case—as interesting a challenge to him (and to you) as the first two, and as cunningly appealing . . . Long may the retired old professor decode, decipher, and detect!

THE SECRET OF THE GOLDEN TILE

by ALAN K. YOUNG

PONSONBY SET THE CANDLE BESIDE him on the cot, steadying it with one hand, while with the other he opened the leather binder on his lap. The single sheet of paper inside, protected by a transparent plastic cover, was tan and obviously brittle with age, but the words, in Joshua Singleton's cramped, spidery hand, were still quite legible.

So this is it, he thought: Joshua's mystery paragraph, the key to the Secret of the Golden Tile. He had heard of it often, as who on the Briarwood campus had not, but this was the first time he had seen it. He adjusted his spectacles more firmly on his nose, drew the candle closer to his knee, and began to read:

Oh, which of you would find my gold? Who among you would unlock that truth which lurks within my walls? What man among you would wish to know that which this old mansion knows, and only it? But how know, how? How will you find it? How will you hunt it? By night or day? By sun or moon? At black midnight or blazing noon? On land or air or bounding main? In rolling surf or gusty wind? How find it? How? What tortuous track or cunning trail must you follow? How can you know in what dark hall, what shady room, it awaits your coming? How know through what yawning doorway, by what waiting window, atop what distant

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roof, through what musty attic, past what dark wall you must pass to find it? Hark now! Though I am dumb, long in my tomb, with dust my gag and worms within my brain, still mark my words: find that which is unusual about this paragraph and apply a similar formula to that inscription which you will find upon my sarcophagus. Throw out nought, and add that which stays, and its sum will furnish you with a solution to this grand conundrum. And Joshua upon his winding horn shall blow and walls fall down, and straightway show you a wondrous path to your undying glory and my shining gold. So to arms, boys, to arms! Work! Vigor! Action! Good hunting all!

Ponsonby remained bent over the paragraph for fifteen minutes. Then he closed the binder and sat erect, chuckling softly to himself. So that's it, he thought: *find that which is unusual about this paragraph*. I wouldn't have thought Josh had that much deviousness in him—*or* so much purple prose.

Now what was the inscription on his tomb? Ponsonby took a pad and a pen from his inside coat pocket, jotted down a series of letters and numbers, and finished by adding a column of a dozen figures. Then he straightened up with a grunt of satisfaction. As he did so, the candle tipped precariously, its flickering light leaping nimbly in and out of the web-festooned corners of the room.

Careful, he thought, careful! It would never do to start a fire in here; the boys would suspect him of having started it deliberately, to force them to let him out. And he had compromised his dignity quite enough by allowing himself to be lured here in the first place; there were lengths to which a Professor of English emeritus, now in his seventies, should be tempted—even by a mystery as intriguing as that of the Golden Tile.

And yet he couldn't really regret coming; for forty years he had longed for a chance to cross wits one last time with Joshua Singleton. And now he had that chance, and had won, too—of that he was certain. He had found the answer to Joshua's mystery paragraph. A rather uneasy answer, perhaps, but— Again he chuckled softly to himself.

He stood up and removed his coat, vest, and tie, placing them on the concrete bench that encircled the room. An ominously gloating gargoyle, part of the room's elaborate frieze, leered down at him through the gloom. Ponsonby turned his back on it, placing the candle on the floor beside the cot and sitting down again to remove his shoes. He decided he would keep his trousers

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on; they would look like the devil in the morning, but then scholars were supposed to look seedy—it was part of the image.

He got into bed, leaning over the edge to blow out the candle. For a moment the blackness and silence that engulfed him were blacker and deeper than any he had ever known. Then gradually the room came alive with a thousand scurryings and whisperings and—did spiders breathe, he wondered? But the blackness remained.

He turned on his side, reaching out with one hand to feel the cold concrete surface against which the cot had been placed. It was strange to think of Joshua Singleton lying only an arm's reach away behind that cold concrete, sleeping quietly where he had slept, in death, forty years.

"I'm afraid, old friend," Ponsonby whispered, "that I've solved your Secret of the Golden Tile. But it had to be, Josh. It was time." He was silent a moment, as though waiting for a reply. But finally, "Good night, Joshua," he said, and fell asleep ...

The decision which had led Ponsonby to spend a night in Joshua Singleton's crypt in the basement of the doomed Sigma Gamma House had been made a week before in his own sunlit study on Spring Street. It had started out as an ordinary morning—he engrossed in the Briarwood *Herald,* Mrs. Garvey engaged in her weekly rearrangement of the dust on his thousands of beloved books.

Ponsonby had lowered his paper and peered thoughtfully at his housekeeper over the rim of his spectacles. "Now why, Mrs. Garvey, would a man contribute so specific a sum as $35,816.94 to a building fund? It almost has to be principal plus interest, but why that, and why should he be so reticent about explaining it?"

"What's that, love?"

"Listen to this." He turned his attention back to the story on page one. "'Elliot P. Howard, a 1958 graduate of Briarwood College, returned to his alma mater last night to launch the Sigma Gamma building fund drive with a contribution of $35,816.94 toward the fraternity's new home.

"'The young financial wizard, who according to Wall Street legend parlayed his small amount of savings into a multimillion-dollar fortune in just ten years, delivered the keynote address at the fund's kickoff banquet in the present Sigma Gamma House on College Avenue, where he once waited on tables. That house, which the late 'Tile King' Joshua Singleton bequeathed to the fraternity in 1929, is to be razed next summer to make way for the Tri-State Freeway.

"'Mr. Howard announced his

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gift at the close of his address. He declined to explain the unusual amount, saying only that he had chosen the figure "for personal reasons".'

"Now what sort of 'personal reasons' would prompt a man to donate such a quixotic sum?"

"Maybe it was just what he had on him at the time," suggested Mrs. Garvey cheerfully. "Many's the time I seen my Billy, God rest his soul, empty his pockets to one of them Salvation lassies down at Hatley's Bar. Not that his funds ever run to anything like—what was it again, love?"

"$35,816.94," said Ponsonby.

"The Lord be praised!" said Mrs. Garvey. "That ought to build the boys a nice new house now surely."

"Not in this day and age, I'm afraid. They could raise ten times that amount and still not replace the old Singleton mansion."

Mrs. Garvey's feather duster paused in mid-air. "Well, I'll have to grant you that, so I will. I'll never forget that house—I used to help out there at some of the old gentleman's parties back in the twenties, and there must've been twenty rooms on the ground floor alone, and no telling how many more up the stairs, and every blessed one of them covered from floor to ceiling with them little tiles. Some bigger than others, of course, and all sorts of colors and patterns, every room being different. I didn't care much for it meself; too much like living in a public convenience, sort of."

Ponsonby smiled, remembering. He had been at many of those parties himself, a young Assistant Professor of English, befriended by wealthy, literature-loving old Josh Singleton. He had been in that house on quieter evenings, too, when the two of them had sat into the small hours over a game of chess, or trying to stump one another with obscure quotations. At first he hadn't cared for the tiled walls either, but gradually he had come to like them—perhaps because he had liked Josh so much.

"Those tiles were the source of Mr. Singleton's fortune," he had explained to Mrs. Garvey. "He used only the finest in his house because he intended it to be his monument. *And* his tomb." Ponsonby chuckled, remembering the night Joshua had described his elaborate scheme to insure that his beloved walls would be kept intact after his death. "That's why Joshua thought up the Secret of the Golden Tile, you see, and set forth the terms of it in his will—so that the Sigma Gammas wouldn't be tempted to tear out or redecorate those walls. He arranged it so that they weren't inheriting just another big house, but a house with a corpse en-

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tombed in the cellar and a treasure hidden behind the walls and a secret message that held the key to that treasure. A house as steeped in mystery and mumbo jumbo as the most romantic pledge could wish. And what fraternity could resist perpetuating a tradition like that?"

"Well, the boys has added a few traditions of their own, as I hear it," said Mrs. Garvey. "The very idea!—necking parties in the old gentleman's crypt!"

Ponsonby threw back his head with a hearty guffaw. "Really? Magnificent! And Josh would have got a tremendous kick out of it, too, I know. I've never met anyone who could equal his zest for life. He was determined to meet all its challenges, even death itself, with style! And the inscription on his tomb, which is said to be part of the Secret of the Golden Tile, is a challenge to the Sigma Gammas to savor the whole mortal experience as fully as he did: 'COME: LIVE, LOVE, DIE—EXCEL!' "

"But is that Golden Tile business really true, Professor? It always sounded a bit barmy to me—"

"Perhaps so, Mrs. Garvey, but it's true none the less. Joshua hid $20,000 behind one of the tiles in his house and left a secret message—a riddle of some kind, I presume, although no outsider has ever been permitted to see it—which he also bequeathed to the fraternity. And the member who solves the riddle and locates the so-called Golden Tile divides the treasure with the chapter. But so far—" His explanation was cut short by the peal of the doorbell.

As he studied the two young men whom Mrs. Garvey ushered into the room a few moments later, Ponsonby could not help but reflect on the transience of youthful fashion. Not many years ago the boys in his classes had worn their hair reduced to a skull-hugging fuzz; today's visitors boasted locks that threatened to cover their ears and were combed so low on their foreheads they all but merged with their eyebrows. Their spokesman, a tall blond youth with an infectious grin, introduced himself as Brad Chandler, his short stocky companion as Carl Justin.

"Well, gentlemen," said Ponsonby when they were seated and Mrs. Garvey had retired to the kitchen, "to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"Sir," said Brad, "we've been appointed by our fraternity to call and ask your help in solving a mystery. Because we've heard that's sort of been your thing since you retired."

"I don't know that I'd call it my 'thing,' Mr. Chandler, although I have been able to help with the solution to one or two little puzzles."

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"Well, I don't know if you could call this a little puzzle, sir. The guys in our fraternity have been *trying* to solve it for forty years."

Ponsonby's eyebrows recorded his surprise. "You're not from Sigma Gamma?"

"Yes, sir," his visitors replied, almost in unison.

"I guess you've heard of the Secret of the Golden Tile?" asked Brad.

"Indeed I have. In fact, my housekeeper and I were discussing it just before you arrived. But you don't mean to say that after all these years you're going to let an outsider see Joshua Singleton's secret message?"

Brad spread his hands imploringly. "We've *got* to get some expert help, Professor, because the house is going to be torn down at the end of this semester, and if we haven't found the tile by then we're in trouble."

"But if the house is doomed anyway, why not just have a tile-removing party? Surely there can't be so many—"

"Only 582,634 of 'em!" interposed Carl, his round red face a mark of youthful despair.

"Good heavens!" said Ponsonby. "But even so, with the proper tools and a little hard work—"

"Oh, we could get them off all right"—Brad glared unhappily at the patch of carpet between his feet—"or for that matter we could let the wreckers do it for us. But dammit, if we end up doing by muscle power what not one brother has been able to do by brain power in forty years, it's going to make the Sigma Gammas a joke all over campus. And it'll put a miserable end to a great tradition, too, because we'll have Old Single's money but we still won't know what his paragraph means, or how it was supposed to lead us to the Golden Tile."

"I see what you mean," said Ponsonby, "but after all, *I'm* not a member of your fraternity."

His visitors grinned sheepishly. "You're not a member *now*, sir," ventured Carl, "but there's nothing in Old Single's will that say an honorary member can't take a crack at the paragraph, and we thought if you were willing—"

"We'd have to ask you to observe all his rules," interrupted Brad. "You'd have to spend the night at the House, and you'd get just one chance to pick the tile, and if you were right you'd have to share the treasure with the chapter."

"One chance?" said Ponsonby. "Do you mean I would have just one opportunity to pinpoint a single tile—no pun intended, gentlemen—out of more than half a million?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. That's the way it's stipulated in Old Single's will. Every new member gets one crack at it; he's given the mys-

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tery paragraph and a candle to read it by, and then locked up overnight in the old man's crypt. If he yells to be let out before daybreak he loses even his one chance. But if he sticks it out all night he's allowed to pick one tile. He's on his honor to have some logical reason for his choice, though, and not just pick a number out of the air."

"A number?"

"Mr. Singleton left a diagram which numbers the tiles room by room all through the house. The numbering starts in the ballroom and ends up with 582,634 in the attic."

"And how many of those tiles have your members checked out in the forty years since he died?"

There was a moment of uneasy silence. The boys seemed less to be resting on their chairs than gently wrestling with them, as though the chairs were living creatures that had to be held down.

"How many gentlemen?" Ponsonby prompted.

"Well, sir," said Brad, "we only take in about a dozen pledges a year, so there've been fewer than five hundred brothers in that time. And some of the guys haven't been able to stick it out in the tomb overnight. And a lot of us haven't been able to get to first base with the paragraph and so couldn't honestly pick a tile. And then for a couple years during the war—"

"How many, Mr. Chandler?"

Brad gulped. "Fifty-four, sir."

"It *is* a devil of a puzzle, Professor," offered a red-faced Carl.

"I'm sure it is. And I must confess that I've long wished for a chance to try my wits at it. But until now I hadn't known the conditions of such a trial, and now that I do—." Ponsonby shook his head sadly. "To be frank, gentlemen, crypts are always such damp, comfortless—"

"We realize that, Professor," said Brad, "but there's nothing in Old Single's will that says we can't put in a cot and a couple of blankets for one night. And if you wanted, we could have someone right outside ..."

And so Ponsonby had allowed himself to be persuaded ...

He awoke with Joshua Singleton's skeleton claws digging firmly into his shoulder. Then he realized it was Brad Chandler shaking him awake.

"Are you all right, sir?"

"Of course I'm all right. Why the devil wouldn't I be all right?" He struggled awkwardly to sit up.

"Well, you were sleeping so soundly that for a minute— But you made it, Professor. The sun's up."

A dozen of Ponsonby's new brothers had crowded into the crypt, eager for the revelation even though several had obviously not yet recovered from the rev-

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elry of the night before. Ponsonby's initiation as an honorary Sigma Gamma, while considerably modified in deference to his age, had nevertheless been a rousing one, climaxed by his announcement that his share of the treasure, if he found the Golden Tile, would be donated to the building fund. This was, he had assured his brothers, no great sacrifice for one of his many years and few needs, yet even so their cheers had been loud, their toasts numerous, and the evening one of memorable conviviality.

But now the moment of truth had arrived.

"Did you figure it out, sir?" asked Brad. "Do you know which is the Golden Tile?"

Ponsonby got stiffly to his feet, retrieved the note pad from his coat pocket, and consulted the results of last night's arithmetic. "Gentlemen," he said, "I suggest you look behind Tile Number 1872."

Number 1872 turned out to be on the south wall of what had once been Joshua Singleton's ballroom, near the center of the bottom row. Like all the other tiles in the room it was a six-inch white ceramic square with a border of blue flowers.

Pool and ping-pong tables were hastily moved back so that the brothers could form a semicircle around the fateful tile, with Ponsonby occupying the place of honor in the center. The chapter's sergeant-at-arms lit two candles in front of a black-draped portrait of Joshua Singleton; Carl Justin, as chapter Historian, read the mystery paragraph in suitably stentorian tones; the members chanted in unison their benefactor's epitaph, "COME: LIVE, LOVE, DIE—EXCEL!"; and President Chandler pried off the tile and—to Ponsonby's carefully disguised gratification—pulled out a small black metal box.

A moment later, however, the expression on Brad's face had stifled the cheers that had been awaiting release for forty years.

"What is it? What's the matter?" A dozen members crowded around, trying to read over his shoulder the small slip of paper that had been the box's sole contents.

"Oh, nuts!" said someone. "Not another code!"

Brad handed the slip to Ponsonby. On it was typed the single word, "Sorry—" and beneath that: "HODIE MIHI, CRAS TIBI."

Ponsonby suppressed a smile. "Not a code, gentlemen, but an old Latin saying. *Hodie mihi, cras tibi* means 'Today for me, tomorrow for thee.' Or you might say, 'My turn today, yours tomorrow.' I'm afraid someone has beaten us to the Golden Tile."

"You mean some no-good fink took all the treasure for himself?"

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"If there ever *was* any treasure," snorted Carl. "Maybe this whole thing was just Old Single's idea of a practical joke. Maybe—"

"No," interrupted Ponsonby, "Joshua Singleton was a man of unimpeachable integrity. If his will said he had hidden $20,000 behind a certain tile in this house, then you can be positive he did."

"So some creep must have solved the secret of the paragraph and made off with all the dough. And it could've been any time in the past forty years!"

"Tell us anyway, sir," said Brad when the general chorus of indignation had subsided, "what *is* unusual about Old Single's paragraph?"

"When one analyzes it logically, Mr. Chandler, the answer is quite easy—or, perhaps, if I may be allowed a little pun, I might better say *un*easy." Ponsonby beamed happily at his brothers, but a sea of blank faces quickly prodded him back to his explanation. "I began by ruling out a solution based on content. In a world whose writers range all the way from masterful prose stylists to stumbling schoolboy essayists, what can be truly unusual about the content of *any* paragraph considered entirely out of context?

"Nothing, I decided, and so moved on to consider the physical paragraph as a whole. Is there anything unusual about that? —its appearance, for example. I quickly decided there was not.

"Well, then, what about the next largest unit in the paragraph, the sentence? Is there anything extraordinary about the sentences in Joshua's paragraph? Again I decided not, and so moved on to clauses and phrases."

"I didn't notice anything unusual about them," said Brad.

"Nor did I. And so I came to the unit—the words themselves."

"But what can be unusual about a word?"

"Maybe he snuck in some words that aren't really words," suggested a mop-haired youth on the edge of the group.

"No," said Brad, "I checked on that."

"How about misspelled words?"

"None of those either."

"If you had read as many student essays as I have," observed Ponsonby, "you would scarcely classify misspellings as unusual."

"But if there's nothing unusual about the words themselves, sir, then where are we? There's nothing left to analyze."

"Oh, come now, gentlemen. Is a word an irreducible unit? Isn't there a still smaller unit?"

"You can't mean *letters*?"

"Why not?"

"But what the heck can be unusual about a letter? If he'd filled his paragraph with *x*'s or *q*'s—"

"There you are!" cried Ponsonby. "That's one side of the coin. Now what's the reverse?"

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"I don't follow you, sir."

"Gentlemen, a paragraph which made repeated use of comparatively rare letters like *x* or *q* would certainly be unusual, would it not? Then by the same token, a paragraph which makes no use whatsoever of an extremely *common* letter—"

"I've got it!" shouted Carl, who had been studying the paragraph. "There aren't any *e*'s!"

"Precisely!" said Ponsonby. "Here we have a lengthy English paragraph without a single *e*, even though *e* is by far the most frequently used letter in our language. Indeed, the odds against an entirely *e*-less paragraph of that length occurring *by chance* in English must be absolutely astronomical—a billion-to-one at the very least, I should imagine. Joshua probably had quite a difficult time even creating the one he did, although he must have had a lot of fun doing it, too. There at the end, you see, he's indulged himself in a sly pun. How does it go? 'Work! Vigor! Action!' In short, gentlemen, in seeking to unravel the Secret of the Golden Tile you were to allow yourself no *ease*."

"Ouch!" said Carl.

"But how do you—what does the paragraph say? —'apply a similar formula' to the inscription on his tomb?" asked Brad. "How does it go again—?"

"'COME: LIVE, LOVE, DIE —EXCEL!'" quoted Ponsonby. "And it's very simple, Mr. Chandler; you simply discard the *E*'s —all capitals, of course, since the epitaph is engraved on Joshua's sarcophagus in capital letters. And having got rid of the *E*'s, you then look for a common denominator in the remaining letters, some way to add them together, as the paragraph tells you to do. And if you are reasonably astute, it should soon strike you that if it weren't for the *O*'s you would *have* such a common factor, because the other letters are all—"

"Roman numerals!" said Brad.

"Precisely. But how do you get rid of the *O*'s? Again very simply. Because Joshua also tells you to 'throw out nought'—n-o-u-g-h-t —which, while it does mean 'nothing,' is also an acceptable variant spelling of n a u g h t or zero. Which in turn is identical to the letter *O*.

"Now I must confess, gentlemen, that at this point I was compelled to pause. Because the paragraph says to 'add that which stays,' but once the *E*'s and *O*'s are deleted from the first four words, the remaining letters in each—CM, LIV, LV and DI—all form proper Roman numerals when regarded collectively, although their sum if they are so added won't be the same as it would be if they were added individually. However, since the remaining letters in the fifth word

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—XCL—do not *collectively* form a proper Roman numeral, I assumed that Joshua had intended *all* the numerals from *all* the words to be added individually. I did so, and came up with a grand total of 1872."

"Well, I'll be!" said Brad. "So *that's* it!"

"Not any more it's not," moaned Carl. "*Now* the secret is who made off with our twenty grand, and without it, what's to become of Old Single?"

Ponsonby regarded the boys questioningly. "What did the missing treasure have to do with Mr. Singleton's remains?"

"Well, you see, sir," explained Brad, "our National Council has to approve the use of all funds raised in a public drive like the one we're having, and they're refusing to let us earmark any money for moving Old Single to our new House. They say a corpse in the basement gives the fraternity a bad image. But we're all so fond of the old boy, and since there are times when he *does* come in handy—"

"Have you ever had a girl grab you and squeeze for dear life, and on a first date, too?"

"Like when you're showing her the crypt and suddenly there's a power failure—"

"I can see how Joshua *does* add a distinctive touch," said Ponsonby.

"Which is why we were planning to use the treasure to recreate his crypt in our new House," continued Brad. "Because the treasure wouldn't be money from the fund drive, so the National Council wouldn't have had any say about how we used it. Only now that there *is* no treasure I guess we'll just have to have him carted off to a cemetery like everybody else."

"It was going to be real cool, Professor," said Carl. "We were going to put him in temporary storage and then move him to our new House in the Homecoming parade next fall as part of our float, with a 'Crypt Queen' from one of the sororities and a rock combo and everything."

"Indeed," said Ponsonby when he had recovered from a sudden fit of coughing, "I'm sure Mr. Singleton would have enjoyed that immensely." And Josh *would* have, too, he realized—no one more. The Professor frowned, and pulled from his vest pocket the small slip of paper that he had unthinkingly stuffed there. *Hodie mihi, cras tibi*. So. Just so.

"Tell me, gentlemen," he said, "what if you were to receive a donation of $20,000 which was contingent upon its being used for that very purpose—to reinter Joshua Singleton in your new House? And suppose it was from an alumnus of some stature. Would your National Council make you turn it down?"

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"Twenty grand? Sir, those guys wouldn't say no to that kind of money if it was contingent on our interring somebody who wasn't even dead yet!"

"Hmmm. Perhaps I *might* be able to do something then. No promises, mind you, but let me work on it . . ."

The following morning found Ponsonby seated at his desk staring morosely at a sheet of paper covered with figures, while across the study Mrs. Garvey flailed away at the bookshelves with her feather duster. Suddenly the Professor crumpled the paper and tossed it angrily into the wastebasket. "Of course he wouldn't have done that well in a savings account."

"What was that, love?" asked Mrs. Garvey over her shoulder.

"A return of seven, on the other hand," continued Ponsonby, "would suggest an element of risk which he'd be far too vain to acknowledge. So six—yes, it must be six. I should have tried six in the first place. Now let's see—ten years out of college—"

Taking a clean sheet of paper, he began diligently multiplying and adding, finalizing each new total with a small grunt of satisfaction. Yes, yes, it was going to come out right this time, he was sure of it. Already the letter was forming in his mind:

Dear Mr. Howard:

I am aware, sir, that you have already been a most generous contributor to the building fund of the Sigma Gamma Fraternity here at Briarwood College. But perhaps you will permit a brother—old in years if young in fraternal ties—to wonder if you might not find it in your heart to open your purse strings once more in support of another worthy cause, one closely allied to that of a new campus home for our beloved Brotherhood. If you will but remember *how much* our fraternity has contributed to your success in years past, and then recall with me that old Latin saying, *Hodie mihi, cras tibi* . . .

"That's it!" cried Ponsonby with such vehemence that Mrs. Garvey actually jumped. He drew a circle around the result of his arithmetic, threw down his pencil, and leaned back in his chair, peering at the startled housekeeper over the rim of his spectacles. "If, Madam, you were to lend me the sum of $20,000 at six percent interest, said interest to be compounded annually and added to the principal, do you know how much I would owe you at the end of ten years?"

The good woman was so thoroughly at a loss as to the desired answer that she could only smile.

"Exactly $35,816.94!" said Ponsonby triumphantly.

"The Lord be praised!" said Mrs. Garvey.

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The author, Robert Edward Eckels, was born on December 7, 1930 in East St. Louis, Illinois. He lived and worked in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, and Ohio before settling down in Maryland where he is employed by the Social Security Administration as Staff Assistant to the Assistant Bureau Director for Claims Policy. Mr. Eckels is married and has one son.

Mr. Eckels tells us that he has been writing fiction "off and on" for more than 20 years. "The Man in the Revolving Door" is his first published story, and now that he has "broken the ice" on the surface of Rejection Lake, battered down the gate of Acceptance City, he is hard at work on other stories—which we, for two, can hardly wait to read . . .

THE MAN IN THE REVOLVING DOOR

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

YOU'D THINK, CONSIDERING ALL the trouble I had later, that I would have had some warning, some flash of intuition at the start that would have said *Watch Out.* But instead it all started in the most ordinary way, and I was too deeply embroiled to avoid it before I even knew I was in it.

The man's name was, he said, Theodore Holbrook, and he had never been a patient of mine. You see what I mean? There was nothing out of the ordinary in that. Although my practice was well established I still accepted new patients. There was nothing out of the ordinary about the man either.

He sat, like any other patient or would-be patient, in the low semi-

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reclining chair across from my desk, letting his gaze wander curiously around the room while I spent a few moments reading the notes my office nurse had prepared. When I looked up, his glance had passed from the framed certificates that identified Lawrence Ross—me—as a graduate of Johns Hopkins and a duly qualified and licensed M.D. to the silver-plated model of a bombing plane perched on a corner of my desk.

I smiled slightly to break the ice. "A souvenir of my days in the Air Force," I said.

Holbrook smiled back. He had a particularly engaging smile, something like Van Johnson's in the days when he was making movies with Judy Garland or June Allyson. There were other resemblances, too: the same pleasantly open face and the same brushed-back brownish hair.

"I know," he said. "You were a major serving as flight surgeon with the 7822nd Bomber Group in England from 1943 until the end of the war."

His answer surprised me. He was much too young to have been a member of the 7822nd, and although it was no secret I doubted if there was anyone in town with the possible exception of my wife and one or two close friends who could identify my old Air Force unit. It was slightly disconcerting to hear a total stranger rattle it off as if it were common knowledge. Still, that was no reason for me to be upset.

"You seem to know a good deal about me," I said, waiting for his explanation. But when it came it wasn't what I expected at all.

"I've made it my business to," Holbrook said seriously.

This was definitely disconcerting. I would expect any prospective patient to make some sort of investigation into my medical qualifications, but this was too much. I felt a growing sense of irritation and to cover it I retreated into professionalism.

"Perhaps," I said, "you'd better tell me what seems to be the matter with your health."

I might as well not have spoken for all the attention he paid me.

"I believe Michael Sovolos is a patient of yours," he said.

"Yes," I said shortly. Actually, Michael was more a friend than a patient, but I did prescribe medication for him occasionally. "Did he recommend me to you?" If he did, I'd have a few words to say to Michael the next time we met. I put in a long day without having my time wasted by a garrulous young man, however ingratiating his smile may be.

"Not exactly," Holbrook said. "Although he is the reason I'm here. Perhaps this will make everything clearer." He laid a leather cardholder on my desk and flipped it open.

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Without looking at the card I said, "What are you, Mr. Holbrook? An insurance investigator?"

"Read the I.D., Doctor," Holbrook said.

I picked up the leather case. It held a single green laminated plastic card. The upper left quarter showed a full-face photograph of the man sitting opposite me. The rest of the card identified him as an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency.

It took several seconds for the import of the words on the card to seep through to my conscious mind. I looked from the card to Holbrook. "The C.I.A.," I said. "I'm afraid I don't understand—"

"It'll take some explaining, Doctor," Holbrook said. He took the case from my hand and slipped it into his jacket pocket. "I take it we can't be overheard here?"

"No, of course not."

Holbrook nodded. All trace of the boyish grin was gone now. "Michael Sovolos," he said, "is a Communist agent. Spy, if you like. And one we've been after for a long time."

"That's ridiculous!" I burst out. "Why, I've known Michael for—"

"For ten years," Holbrook said. "Ever since he came here, supposedly a refugee from behind the Iron Curtain. But how well do you *really* know him? Do you know anything except what he's told you himself?"

"No, but—" I shook my head. "Why, the whole thing's ridiculous! What would a spy be doing around here?" But even as I spoke I thought of the plant west of town that manufactured precision instruments. Some of its products were used in the aerospace and missile programs.

Something of what I was thinking must have shown in my face because Holbrook smiled—a very different smile from the boyish grin he'd used before—and said, "Precisely," just as if he'd been reading my mind.

I realized suddenly that I was standing behind my desk. But I couldn't remember rising. Now I sat down slowly, and my thoughts ran riot.

Michael a spy! It was almost beyond comprehension. But here was an agent of my government to prove it. Things like this just didn't happen—at least, not to me or people like me.

But it had happened. And I felt personally betrayed. My friendship had been used and betrayed.

"Well," I said gruffly, "why don't you arrest him then? Deport him or whatever it is you do with spies. Why come to me?"

"It's not quite that simple, Doctor," Holbrook said. "To coin a phrase, Sovolos is just a little fish in a big sea. There are others—bigger fish—that he can lead us to. So it would be a mistake to pull him in just now. But he

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does have something we do need right now—a list of his contacts inside the missile plant. And that's why we came to you, Doctor. You can get that list for us."

"Now," I said, "you *are* being ridiculous. I'm a doctor, not a secret agent." But still, somewhere deep inside, I was pleased—and flattered—that they had come to me for help. That didn't mean I would do what they wanted. But I was pleased nonetheless. "You must have better ways of doing these things," I went on, "trained agents . . ."

"Trained agents we do have, Doctor. But not a way into Sovolos' house that wouldn't give the game away. That's what *you* have." He paused. "Or don't you still go to his house every Thursday evening to play chess?"

I swallowed hard. "I suspect," I said, "you already know the answer to that."

Holbrook flashed his boyish grin. "Of course I do. I wouldn't be here if I didn't." He was all business again. "There's no alternative, Doctor. It has to be someone who has a legitimate reason for going into the house. Anything else—a faked burglary, for example—would only make Sovolos suspicious."

"And I suppose," I said sarcastically, "that he wouldn't be suspicious if I just stood up and said, 'Excuse me, but while you're thinking about your next move, I'll just go and search your bedroom.'"

Holbrook smiled faintly, and I realized that by interposing an objection I had indicated that I was actually considering his proposal. The idea was frightening.

"He wouldn't be suspicious if he were asleep," Holbrook said blandly. "You're a doctor—you'd know what to give him."

"No," I said. "The whole thing is out of the question. I couldn't possibly do what you ask."

But the truth was, it was the sort of thing I could do. The medicine I prescribed for Michael was a simple tranquilizer, and in recent months he had got into the habit of taking one of the tablets just before starting our game. "To keep from getting too excited over the match," he said good-humoredly because it was I who always became too engrossed in the game. And to cap it off, because Michael had an almost pathological fear of overdosing himself, I limited his supply to one week's pills—which, being a friend, I brought with me every Thursday night.

It would be a simple matter to substitute a narcotic, wait for it to take effect, then search his house. Michael would never suspect anything. In fact, he would probably apologize later for his rudeness in falling asleep.

Holbrook looked at me thoughtfully, then deliberately shifted his gaze to the model bomber on my desk. "I'm not go-

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ing to wave the flag at you, Doctor," he said. "I don't think I have to. You proved your patriotism in one war. And once you have a chance to think it over, you'll prove it again in this so-called 'cold' war we're now fighting. And that," he said, rising from the chair, "is all I ask—that you think it over. I'll leave you my card." He held out a card and I took it mechanically. "You can reach me at that number any time of day or night."

At the door he added, almost as an afterthought, "After all, Doctor, it's not as if we were asking you to do anything particularly dangerous. All we want is that you give a man a sleeping pill and then go through his rooms." He winked at me suddenly. "A real piece of cake—as the British would say."

With that he was gone, leaving me with the odd feeling that I had just been part of a scene from a movie and that an actor should be standing behind my desk, not me. Only the small stiff paper rectangle between my fingers reminded me that it was all very, very real.

If I *were* a movie doctor I would have had my nurse—who would, of course, be either young and sexy and obviously in love with the doctor or older with a wisecracking case-hardened exterior hiding a heart of gold—cancel my appointments for the rest of the day so that I could give full time to sorting out the welter of thoughts surging through my mind. But in real life doctors don't do that sort of thing, not if they have any concern for their patients' welfare. (They don't have nurses like that either; mine is efficient, but middle-aged and plain.)

So I had no choice but to go on. Which in a way was a blessing because by 7:30, when the reception room was cleared out and my nurse and I had finally closed the office, my day's work had displaced Holbrook's proposal. I hadn't forgotten it, but it was only one problem among many—one I would deal with in my own way and in my own time.

It's moot to ask it now, of course, but I can't help wondering what would have happened if it had stayed that way. That is, if I hadn't met Dodson.

He was waiting for me outside my office. When he saw me coming he pushed himself away from the wall, holding up one cupped hand just too late to cover the yawn distorting his face. He wore a checked sports coat, light-gray pants, and the widest tie I've seen since 1948.

"Dr. Lawrence Ross?" he said.

I sighed. Another one of those perennial freeloaders who manage to catch you out of office hours with a "simple question that wouldn't be worth coming to see you about." I said, without break-

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ing stride, "My office hours start at nine tomorrow. You can see me then."

"I know, Doc," he said, falling into step beside me. "I know. And the next time I have a sore toe I'll come to see you during office hours. But right now it's my business I want to see you about, not yours. And my office hours run round the clock." He dangled an open cardholder in front of me. "Dodson. C.I.A."

I stopped short. "Good Lord," I cried, "can't you people leave me alone? I have your man Holbrook's card. I'll call him if I decide to go along with your plan."

Dodson looked at me speculatively. "I think," he said, "you had better tell me all about Mr. Holbrook and his plan. But—" he took my arm and guided me up the street—"this is not the place to do it. Got a car, Doc?"

I pulled my arm free. In appearance and manner Dodson—with his "Doc's"—was too much like a racetrack tout for my liking. Nevertheless, I let him accompany me up the street.

One thing I will say for Dodson: he was a patient man. Every time I tried to ask him something he would shush me with a "Later, Doc." He himself was content to say nothing further until we reached my car. Then he waited beside the right-hand door while I unlocked the door on the driver's side and got in.

For a moment I thought of starting the motor and driving off, leaving Dodson on the sidewalk and out of my life. But, for better or worse, I didn't. I reached over and pulled up the knob on the door lock. A second later Dodson scrambled in.

"Better not just sit here, Doc," Dodson said. "It looks suspicious. Drive around a bit while we talk."

"No," I said and the angry tone of my voice surprised even me. "Not until I know what's going on here. First Holbrook shows up from the C.I.A. and now you. And you don't seem to know anything about him." I shook my head firmly. "I'm not going anywhere until everything is a lot clearer."

Dodson held up a hand. "Okay, Doc, okay. No need to get mad. First of all, this Holbrook. Is he a real clean-cut young guy with brown hair brushed back?"

"Yes, that's Holbrook."

"Yeah. Only his name isn't Holbrook. It's Krasnevski, and he's a Russian agent."

"But, my God," I said, "he can't be. He looks so American. And he told me he was a C.I.A. agent."

"Well, now, of course he looks American. He was picked because he looks American. And just what would you expect him to tell you?" Dodson's voice rose archly. "'Hello, Doctor. I work for the K.G.B.—you know, Russian intelligence. Would you care to indulge in a spot of treason?'" He snorted,

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then laid a hand consolingly on my shoulder. "Don't look so shocked, Doc. It's not the first time they've used this ploy, and you aren't the first one to fall for it. There was a babe in London back in the '50's who sold the Limeys down the river for years. And all the time she thought she was helping old Uncle Sugar cross-check on the secret dope his spies were feeding him. Now, tell me: what did Holbrook want you to do?"

When I finished telling him, Dodson let out a long low whistle. "Well," he said, "I'll say one thing for friend Holbrook. He sure plays for big stakes."

"Big stakes?" I said. "Michael?" My head was spinning worse now than when Holbrook had sprung *his* bombshell at me.

"Yeah," Dodson said. "Michael Sovolos." He appeared to consider something carefully, then went on. "I guess under the circumstances you'll have to know this, but if it goes any further—" He left the sentence hanging for a moment, then picked up again on a different tangent. "Anyway, your friend Michael is a pretty modest gent. Before he came over to us he was high up in a certain satellite government. And incidentally, Michael Sovolos isn't his real name. What it is is something you don't need to know. Anyway, even after he came over to our side he kept up a lot of contacts on the other side. That list Holbrook wanted you to get? It's a list of people on the other side of the Curtain that we could—uh—use if the need arose. You can see why they would like to get their hands on it."

"I'm not sure," I said, "just what I see."

Dodson nodded sympathetically. "I know just what you're thinking, Doc," he said. "Holbrook tells you one story and I tell you another. And both of us claim to be C.I.A. men and have I.D.'s to back it up. So who do you believe?"

"Something like that," I admitted.

"Well, I wish I could make it easy and give you a phone number to call. But if you called the C.I.A. they'd deny ever having heard of either a Holbrook or a Dodson." He smiled grimly. "I think you can understand why." He paused just long enough to give me time to nod. "So the only way to do it," he went on, "is the hard way—on faith. But while you're making up your mind take a good hard look at Holbrook's story.

"He told you, didn't he, that it was important not to tip Sovolos off that his cover was blown? So how did he explain this? Sovolos is bound to check that list sooner or later—probably sooner because it's not the sort of thing you toss in a dresser drawer and forget about. So if you steal the list it's only a matter of time before Sovolos is tipped that the game is up. But if Holbrook is a Commie agent

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and all he wants is the list, it doesn't matter if Sovolos is tipped off or not. Right?"

"But in that case," I said, "why doesn't Holbrook steal the list himself? Why should he bother to bring me into it?"

Dodson grinned triumphantly. "Because that house is under constant C.I.A. surveillance. Nobody gets near it unless we know who they are and what their business is."

For the first time since Holbrook had approached me I relaxed, really relaxed. I hadn't realized till then just how tense I had been. Michael wasn't a spy. And I was off the hook. The only thing that troubled me was a stirring of guilt when I remember how quick I had been to condemn my friend. But anyone would have probably reacted the same way under the circumstances. I couldn't really be blamed. It was Holbrook's fault. And I looked forward to taking my revenge.

"I suppose," I said, "that you'll want me to testify against this man Holbrook or whatever his name is?"

Dodson fidgeted. "It's not quite that simple, Doc," he said.

With a sudden sense of foreboding I remembered that I had heard those same words earlier today.

Dodson went on, "We aren't ready to pull the rug out from under Holbrook—not just yet. So—" he dragged the word out—"what we'd like you to do—" again he dragged the word out—"is exactly what Holbrook asked." He smiled happily as he concluded.

"What?" I cried. "Give him the list?"

"Well," Dodson said, "maybe not *exactly* what Holbrook asked. You drug Sovolos and find the list, but you give it to me and I give you a phony one to pass on to Holbrook."

"And what do you do with Michael's list?"

"I sneak it back to its hiding place."

"After making a copy."

Dodson laughed. "Not necessary, Doc. The U.S. Government already has a copy—given to us by Sovolos himself. Our only concern is to get the phony list to Holbrook so we can see who he passes it on to."

I shook my head. "No," I said, "it's impossible. I can't do it."

Dodson leaned toward me. "Is it really so impossible, Doc?" he said. "Think about it. Are we really asking you to do something so difficult? Or dangerous?"

"Not dangerous!" I said. My voice almost cracked, and I coughed twice to bring it under control. "What happens to me when Holbrook finds out that the list is a phony?"

Dodson shrugged. "Who says he will?" He held up a hand to forestall me. "And even if he does he won't blame you. He'll just figure

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it was Sovolos who was too smart for him. That's all."

It was all very convincing—too convincing, in fact. I continued to protest, but Dodson had an answer for everything. And in time the meeting came to its foregone conclusion.

I agreed to help Dodson.

Agreed, however, with a queasy feeling that I should have gone on asking questions until I found the one he had no answer for.

Once in, I wanted the whole affair over and done with as quickly as possible. Dodson agreed, and so did Holbrook when I phoned him and made the necessary arrangements. Nevertheless, I had to wait till Thursday—three days away.

And for me, three days of pure hell. And a hell that was made worse by the fact that I couldn't talk about my problem with anyone. Certainly not with my wife, even if Dodson hadn't forbidden it. I'd never be able to explain to her why a middle-aged general practitioner had allowed himself to get mixed up in a game of espionage and counter espionage. I had a hard enough time explaining it to myself.

Even Michael, who was part of the game, was ruled out as a confidant. You don't keep a friend by admitting your willingness to drug him and search his house, even in a good cause.

I don't know how I got through those three days. But it was Thursday at last, and I was on my way to Michael's for our usual chess match, the bottle of sleeping pills cold and heavy in my pocket.

As usual, Michael met me at the door promptly, as if he had been waiting for me.

"Ah, my good friend," he said, "come to revenge yourself for last week. Or," he added with mock severity, "is it my turn this week to seek revenge?" Michael spoke English very well. Only a very slight foreign intonation and a few odd turns of phrasing betrayed that it was not his native language.

While he helped me off with my topcoat I said, "You know exactly what happened last week. In fact, you could recite every move if you wanted to." I had no doubts on that score. Michael had an excellent mind for chess. It was surprising that I ever managed to beat him.

Now he smiled. "Perhaps," he said, "you take me for a chess 'shark' who is merely toying with you until the time comes to bet the really big money."

I laughed. The thought of money riding on one of our games was just too ridiculous. And then I remembered that although the evening had begun just like a hundred others, this one would have a different ending.

When Michael turned back from hanging up my coat I had the vial

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of pills ready in my hand. "Here," I said. "Your week's supply. You'd better take one now before we start." I hoped my voice didn't sound as strained and unnatural to him as it did to me.

"Ah," Michael said, smiling. "I see it all now. The exotic drug which cannot be traced—to dull my senses so that you win easily."

I blushed.

"No, no, my good friend," Michael protested. Like most Europeans he was oversensitive that others might mistake the point of his little quips. "Do not look so stricken. It is only a bad joke." He took the vial from my hand. "To show you, I take one right now. Besides—" he smiled—"it will relax me and make me play all the better."

It was all I could do to keep from following him out of the room to insure that he did take one of the tablets. I forced myself to go into the living room and stand by the already set-up chessboard.

However, from where I stood I could hear the sudden rush of water as a faucet was turned on in the kitchen. And in a few moments Michael was back, beaming. "All done," he said. "And now—" he gestured toward the chessboard—"I believe it is your turn for the white."

We sat down and started to play. Almost automatically I moved my king's pawn two squares.

"Aha!" Michael said. "The old standby. Not particularly daring, but a good solid move." He moved his queen's pawn two squares and settled back in his chair to watch me.

This wasn't the first time he'd tried this particular gambit on me. On previous occasions I'd taken the pawn—with disastrous results to me. I wondered what would happen this time if I protected my pawn with my queen's knight.

I never found out. Michael was asleep in his chair.

I eased my chair back and stood up slowly so as not to disturb him, then wondered why I bothered. The drug produced eight hours of dreamless sleep. They could blast a superhighway through the house next door, and he'd still sleep. I watched him for a moment, feeling a vague indefinite regret that I had to do this to a friend; then I set out to search the house.

I'd never searched a house before, but I had the advantage of a double briefing—from Dodson and Holbrook. Dodson had been the more helpful of the two. "It's a small red notebook," he had said, "and it's somewhere in his bedroom. That's all I can tell you because that's all I know. I couldn't find out any more without tipping Sovolos off that something was cooking."

So with this in mind I went directly to Michael's bedroom. It was simply furnished—a double

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bed with a bookcase headboard, two straight chairs, and a chest of drawers with a mirror hanging over it. The wall opposite the chest was half occupied by a sliding-door closet.

Remembering a movie I'd seen years before, I pulled the chair over to the middle of the floor so I could stand on it and peer into the overhead light fixture. There was nothing there. However, the crystal shielding the bulbs was held in place by three small screws. I had no trouble getting the crystal off, but putting it back required that I balance it with one hand while I fastened the screws with the other. It was trickier than it sounds, and twice I almost dropped the crystal.

I was puffing when I got down off the chair. The question of why I had got involved in this affair was stronger than ever in my mind and even more unanswerable. But I was involved. And in for a sheep, in for a goat. I went over and lifted the mirror away from the wall. There was nothing behind it.

The chest of drawers was almost too obvious a place to hide anything in, but both Holbrook and Dodson had stressed that I should overlook nothing. Using almost identical terms they had said, "Look for the ordinary that's out of the ordinary."

Reluctantly then, because I felt a strong distaste for going through my friend's personal things, I pulled out all the drawers and searched them thoroughly.

All I discovered was that Michael was a very tidy man.

I checked the bed, top and bottom: nothing. I felt along the edge of the wall-to-wall carpeting and found nothing. Barring a secret panel, which I discounted—I knew when this house was built and for whom—there was no red notebook in the bedroom proper. That left only the closet.

It was a larger and deeper closet than I had suspected, going back far enough to be considered a walk-in. A clothes rack neatly hung with suits and coats ran along the right-hand wall. Opposite it, on the left, a long metal shoetree had been fastened to the wall, and a row of shoes had been impaled on its forms, soles sticking out.

Something struck my eye almost immediately: one of the shoes fitted imperfectly on its form. The shoe was an inch or so out of line.

Here indeed was the "ordinary that was out of the ordinary." I licked my lips, lifted the shoe off its form, and felt inside the toe.

My fingers met a spiral metal edge and a second later I had pulled out a small notebook with a flexible red cover. I slipped the shoe back on its form and paged swiftly through the notebook.

I didn't know what I was look-

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ing for—confirmation that Michael wasn't a spy? In any case, I found no such confirmation. All the entries were in some sort of number code. Slightly disappointed, I put the book in my jacket pocket and started to leave. At the closet door I turned for one last look back and nearly had a heart attack.

All the shoes were now neatly in line.

It was easy enough to figure out what had happened. Once the notebook had been removed, the shoe fit snugly over the shaped shoe-tree. I began to appreciate the advantage of Michael's hiding place. One glance and he would know if anything was wrong.

And if he happened to glance in before Dodson got the notebook back into its hiding place the whole scheme—including my part in it—would have to be explained to him.

I had to set it right, but for one awful moment I couldn't remember which shoe had had the notebook stuffed in it. Then I remembered—the third one from the far end. I hurried back and stuffed my handkerchief into the toe of the shoe. A little juggling and it was unsuspiciously out of line again.

I went back to the living room, left a note for Michael containing, I hoped, the right touch of humorous tolerance for his falling asleep after the first move in our game and was just letting myself out the front door when I remembered my second mistake: I'd left the vial of tablets.

To insure that Michael would get a sleeping pill the first time, every tablet in the vial was a narcotic. I had to get the vial back and substitute the vial of his regular tranquilizer that I still had in my other jacket pocket.

I ran back to the kitchen. There was the glass he'd used. But no vial. He must have put it in his pocket after taking the pill!

Back to the living room where I contemplated with dread the sleeping body I was going to have to search. There was no way to avoid it, though. Having gone this far, I had to go the rest of the way.

I moved the chessboard and began gingerly to pat his pockets. There was no likelihood that he'd wake up, but this was a thousand times worse than going through his bureau drawers.

After an eternity I straightened up—without having found the vial. For a moment I almost gave way to panic, but somehow I managed to keep control.

If the vial wasn't in the kitchen and not on Michael, then obviously it had to be somewhere else in the house. Brilliant deduction, Holmes! But where? I tried to remember what had happened. I had given the vial to Michael; he had gone to the kitchen, taken a pill,

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then returned to the living room.

But not from the kitchen!

Remembrance washed over me and left me limp with relief. He had circled around and come back by way of the bedroom.

Into the bedroom again—the bedroom I'd thought I'd searched so thoroughly. And there, big as life, on top of the chest of drawers was the vial.

It was a matter of seconds to switch vials and rush out of the house. As the door closed behind me I remembered that I hadn't replaced the chessboard. Well, Michael could make what he liked of that. I wasn't going back into that house tonight.

Forty minutes later I met Holbook at the spot we'd arranged and handed him a small red notebook. He leafed through it eagerly, then smacked it loudly against his palm. The sound was as sharp as a pistol shot.

"You won't get a medal for this, Doctor," he said, "but you've performed a greater service for your country in this one night than you did in all those years in the Air Force."

I didn't tell him that Dodson had used almost the same words fifteen minutes earlier when he had given me the false notebook I had just given Holbrook and taken the real one to return to Michael.

And that, as far as I was concerned, was the end of it. I considered myself well out of it, too. It was true I'd get no medal, but then nothing really bad had happened to me either.

That is, nothing really bad had happened to me yet.

It was three weeks later almost to the day when the bad started: Holbrook showed up at my office again.

This time, however, there was a subtle change in him. He still looked like an All American boy, but an All American boy grown cynical and slightly contemptuous.

The cynicism and contempt were more than apparent in the smile he gave me. "Surprised to see me, aren't you, Doctor?"

"Yes," I said. "I thought our business was finished."

"Not quite, Doctor. But first let me give you a little token of appreciation from my government." Still smiling, he placed a package of bills on my desk. "Then we'll talk about the other work you're going to do for us."

"I don't want your money," I said frostily. "And I certainly don't intend to do any more work for you."

"You think not?" Holbrook said in a tone I didn't like at all. "You'll notice," he went on in the same unpleasant tone, "that I said *my* government. Not *our* government or *your* government. I said it that way on purpose because—" he shook his head from side to

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side as if he were instructing a backward child—"your government and my government aren't the same. Not the same at all. In fact, you might even say that your government and my government aren't even as friendly as they might be."

I swallowed twice to keep from blurting out that I already knew all about him and his government, and that the joke was on him. Somehow I managed to say, "Come to the point."

"The point is simply this, Doctor: when you stole that notebook from Sovolos' house you committed an act of espionage against the interests of your country. Your friend Michael isn't a Communist spy. I am."

I tried to look shocked. "And you expect me to continue to work for you!" As I said it I realized that my indignation wasn't entirely feigned. It was shocking that Holbrook would come into my office, brazenly admit being a communist agent, and expect me to continue to do his dirty work for him. That shows, I think, how little I understood the working of spies and their minds. I wasn't to remain ignorant for long.

"I don't believe you have any choice," Holbrook said evenly. "Or rather, that the alternative is even more unpleasant. I don't think *your* government would be very pleased with you if they found out what you had done."

I licked my lips. "And how would they find out?" But I was learning fast; I had already guessed the answer to that.

Holbrook smiled, a caricature of his previous boyish grin. "Some anonymous person would send them copies of photographs of you handing over the damning evidence. Plus a tape recording of our telephone conversation when you agreed to go along with my little scheme." He held up a hand. "Oh, I'll admit the tape's been edited, but even the man who edited it would have a hard time proving that. Maybe it wouldn't be enough to convict. I wouldn't know about things like that. But I do know—" and here his voice grew harsh—"that it wouldn't do your reputation or your practice one damn bit of good. Once the story got out you wouldn't be able to treat a dog for ingrown toenails in this town or anywhere else."

Holbrook relaxed visibly, smiled again. "You wouldn't want that to happen now, would you, Doctor?"

I tried to think of what I would do if I were actually in the position he described. I honestly didn't know. I still don't. It's something to lay awake nights and think about.

Under the circumstances, though, I decided that the only thing to do was stall for time until I could get in touch with Dodson. "What is it you want me to do?" I said.

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Holbrook smiled. "It's very simple, Doctor. Just be a mailbox."

I frowned. "I don't understand."

"Then I'll make it clearer," Holbrook said. "For obvious reasons we don't have a direct contact between the top and bottom levels of our organization. As you've already found out—" again the bitter grin—"a lot of our people don't even know who they're really working for. Anyway, once an agent obtains some—uh—information for us, he just passes it on to the man above him who passes it on to the man above *him*. And so on. The problem is to arrange the meetings. They have to appear to be legitimate, otherwise the suspicious minds of the boys in counterintelligence would start working overtime. And, let's face it, security is a consideration, too. You have to have a few breaks in the chain—cutouts—who don't know the man above or below—unless you want your agents to topple like a row of dominoes once the first one falls."

Holbrook laughed harshly. "I'll bet you thought the U.S. had a monopoly on the domino theory, didn't you?" He didn't wait for any reaction but went right on, "Now what could be more ideal for our purposes than a doctor's office? If an agent has some information to pass on, he just calls for an appointment, identifies himself to you—we can work out passwords and such later—and hands the information over to you. A little later a second agent drops by and picks it up. From the outside it's very legitimate—just two guys going to see a doctor. And secure too. The agents wouldn't know each other; the first one could signal the second by a code ad in the paper. And you'd be a dead end because you wouldn't know how to contact anybody—they'd always contact you." Holbrook's face reflected his mental savoring of the thought. "Perfect," he said, "all the way around."

"Perfect," I said, "for everybody except me. I'd be expendable."

"Only if you happened to get caught," Holbrook said. "You'd be too valuable for us to waste needlessly. So take your choice: refuse and face *certain* exposure—or work with us and face *possible* exposure. Which is it going to be, Doctor?"

"I'll have to think it over," I mumbled.

Oddly enough, that seemed to be the answer Holbrook expected. He stood up. "Do that," he said casually. "Take all the time you want—between now and Saturday noon. I'll call you then and for your sake I hope you have the right answer."

I watched him swagger out of my office, and I thought grimly: I'll have the right answer for you all right. Wait till Dodson and the C.I.A. hear about your scheme to blackmail me into working for you!

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I'm not clear even now about what I expected Dodson to do, but he had got me into this mess and he damn well would have to get me out of it.

It was at that moment I remembered I didn't know how to contact Dodson! I didn't even know his first name.

It took a few seconds for the full seriousness of the situation to sink in. Without Dodson I was a dead duck. There would only be my unsupported word that I hadn't acted as a spy against my country.

The phone on my desk buzzed and I picked it up automatically.

"There's a Mr. Dodson calling, Doctor," my office nurse said. "He insists on speaking to you."

"Put him on," I said fervently.

"Hi, Doc," Dodson said, and how I welcomed the sound of his cheerful, slightly nasal voice. "I understand you had another visit from our mutual friend."

"How did you know?" I exclaimed.

He didn't answer immediately, and for some strange reason that bothered me. Then his voice, confident and self-assured, dissipated my apprehension. "Why, the same way I knew before, of course." He chuckled. "Can't expect me to give away all my secrets." Then seriously: "What did our friend want this time?"

"Is it safe to talk over the phone?" I was becoming suspicious of everything now.

"Huh? Oh, sure. I'm in a phone booth and there's no tap on your end."

I told him everything—what Holbrook had said and how I had played along to gain time.

When I finished, Dodson was silent for a moment. "Boy," he said at last, almost reverently, "what a break this is!"

"Break?"

"The kind of break you dream about! With you on the inside we'll be able to get the lowdown on Holbrook's whole operation."

What he had in mind was all too clear. "No," I said desperately, "I won't do it."

I might as well not have spoken. "It'll be easy, Doc," Dodson said. "We'll plant a girl in your office as a nurse. You just tip her off whenever one of—"

"I told you *no!*"

"Oh? I don't see how you can say that, Doc, seeing as how you're going to have to go along with Holbrook anyway."

"Go along with him? Are you mad?"

"The old-you-know-what really hits the fan if you don't," Dodson said. "He wasn't kidding when he said he'd turn those pictures and the tape recording over to the authorities. And then—" He clicked his tongue against his teeth.

"But you can clear me. You can tell what really happened."

"I'm afraid," Dodson said, "that it's not quite that simple, Doc. As

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I told you before, we're not ready to reel Holbrook in yet. So if you try to blow the whistle, the Agency'd have no choice but to call you a liar."

I was stunned. "You mean," I said, "you'd just stand by and let me be convicted of a crime I didn't commit?"

"Well, we hope it wouldn't come to that. But if it did—well, national security, you know."

"Damn national security," I shouted and slammed the phone down. Nevertheless, I knew I would have to do what he wanted.

I felt as if I were running down a narrow darkened corridor through an infinite succession of doors that swung irrevocably shut behind me once I'd passed. No, there's a better image: I felt as if I were a man in a revolving door—a man who couldn't get out...

I know my behavior that evening worried my wife, although she said nothing. It would have been a relief just to talk to her about it. But if I couldn't tell her before, how could I possibly explain now? Finally I could no longer stand her concerned frowns and went to bed early.

I spent several 180-minute hours fighting the bedclothes before sheer exhaustion began to drag me down into sleep. Then an errant thought strayed up from my subconscious and shocked me awake: it was the question I should have asked Dodson but didn't, the one that had nagged just beyond the range of my conscious mind during those three days before I had gone to Michael's. I'd been too nervous and tense then—too involved—to bring it to mind, and afterward, trying to forget the whole matter, I'd suppressed it. But now conditions were just right and it surfaced.

I sat upright in bed and said aloud, "Why was it necessary for me to steal the book for Dodson in the first place?"

I could see the surprise on Michael's face through the glass panels even before he opened his door.

"Lawrence," he said. "I wasn't expecting you. And so early in the morning too."

"I know you weren't," I said curtly. "But I couldn't wait until Thursday night to see you. May I come in?"

"Of course, of course." Michael stood back to let me enter, then followed me into the living room. Without bothering to take off my overcoat I sank into an armchair. Michael remained standing in front of me.

"Perhaps some coffee?" he said. "You do not look at all well."

"I imagine I don't," I said. "I didn't sleep last night and at my age—"

Michael clucked sympathetically.

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"But as a doctor," he said, "you should know what to do for insomnia."

"Oh, I do, I do." I laughed shortly. "You of all people should know that. But last night I asked myself a question and after that I didn't want to sleep. Because that one question led to other questions, which oddly enough led me to some answers."

"It must have been an important question then," Michael said.

"It was," I said. "Would you like to hear it?"

"If it pleases you, yes."

"It pleases me," I said. I took a deep breath. "Why was it necessary for me to steal the book?"

I was watching Michael closely. Nothing in his expression changed. His lips remained curved upward in the same polite half smile. The slight furrow in his brow didn't alter. But just for a moment there was a small flicker behind his eyes. It told me what I had come to find out: Michael knew what I was talking about.

"I'm afraid," Michael said, "I do not understand your question."

"You should," I said. "It was your book, the one hidden in your shoe in your closet."

"I think," Michael said slowly, "I should call my friend Mr. Dodson of the C.I.A."

"Oh, come off it, Michael. Dodson is no more a C.I.A. agent than I am. Or you are."

"And what led you to that startling conclusion?" Michael's smile was definitely gone now, and I didn't like what had replaced it.

"My question, Michael—the question I asked myself last night. Because there's no answer to it if Dodson really is a C.I.A. agent. If all he wanted to do was pass a false list to Holbrook, there'd be no need for me to steal the real one. Dodson could give me the false one. Then I could come over here as usual, even drug you if necessary to make it look good, and then leave and give Holbrook the false list afterwards. But I wouldn't have had to take the real list."

"All this is very interesting," Michael said. "Please go on."

"So," I said, "Dodson isn't a C.I.A. agent, and for some reason it was necessary to his scheme that I steal the book. It could be that he just wanted the list for himself. But that doesn't square with the way he acted when Holbrook tried to blackmail me into continuing as an agent. Dodson called me—I didn't call him; I couldn't—and pressured me into working for Holbrook, again on the assumption that I would in fact be working undercover for my own country." I shook my head. "But I wouldn't have been."

"No?"

"No. Because when you add everything up, there's only one conclusion possible: Dodson and Holbrook are working the same

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side of the street. The whole thing was just a clever scheme to lull my suspicions and recruit me as an espionage agent. But in that event the book itself had no meaning. It was only a device to trap me. So, Michael, *you* had to be involved."

Michael turned away.

"When I think how easy it was made for me," I went on, "I know you had to be part of it. I was too scared and nervous to think about it at the time but only an idiot would hide anything in a place as obvious as that single out-of-line shoe."

Michael turned back to face me and for the first time I saw the gun. I never realized before how enormous the hole in the barrel of a pistol is.

"I had put you down as being reasonably clever, Lawrence," he said, "but naive. I find—to my sorrow, because I really did like you—that you are much cleverer than I thought. But also much more naive."

"Then you *did* plan it together. The three of you."

He nodded.

"For ten years," I said bitterly, "you planning this. And you can say you really liked me."

"No, not for ten years, although I will admit that the advantages of your office for our purposes did occur to me shortly after I first met you. But it was something I—how should I say?—kept in the back of my mind until the need arose. And now—" he gestured with the gun, not enough, however, to cause him to miss me if he had to pull the trigger—"all that planning for nothing."

"You'd be foolish to kill me, Michael," I said suddenly.

"And why is that?" He was amused. The mouse was defying the cat, and the cat, sure of its strength and cunning, could afford to smile. "Have you left a sealed message with someone—to be opened in the event of your death?"

"No, but you'd lose your mailbox." That erased his gently sarcastic smile, and I added hastily, "You can still have it, you know. It's just going to cost you more." I hoped I didn't sound as panic-stricken as I felt.

Michael's face flowed into a reflective, almost calculating mold. "How much?" he said. The gun's single eye still stared into mine.

"A thousand dollars a month," I said without hesitation.

Michael's head moved slightly, negatively. "Far too much," he said. "We'll give you one hundred a month." The gun didn't waver.

"You're crazy if you think I'd run the risks involved in a thing of this sort for a hundred dollars a month. No, it's a thousand or nothing."

Michael put the gun down, and I realized with a sudden chill that he had been testing me. If I had

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agreed to his ridiculously low terms he would have suspected that I was just talking to save myself and then—I shuddered inwardly and stopped following that line of thought.

"Welcome," he was saying, "welcome to the ranks of the professionals, Lawrence. The smart ones who work only for the money. Because in this business you can never be really sure who your employers are." He smiled wryly. "I think I am working for the Russians. But perhaps not. Perhaps it is Peking or Hanoi or Upper Volta that pays for my services. But what does it matter as long as the pay is good? The penalty for failure is the same in any case.

"But you, my old friend, you are going to have to be more reasonable. A thousand a month *is* too much." His voice turned businesslike again. "Seven fifty. It is my highest offer."

When I opened my mouth to protest he cut me short. "Take it, Lawrence. It is the most you will get. And the alternative—"

I agreed to seven fifty.

Before I left, though, I asked one more question.

"You carried me in those chess games, didn't you?"

Michael pursed his lips and nodded. "Yes," he said. "You really are a terrible chess player."

I'm glad he said that about the chess. It made my calling the F.B.I. much easier.

Stallings, the F.B.I. man—a real F.B.I. man; I made sure of that—met me at the public library, in, of all places, the humor section.

"It's not likely you're being followed, Doctor," he said. "But, as you said on the phone, why take chances? Now, suppose you fill me in on all the details."

When I finished, Stallings' face bore an almost rapt expression. "Beautiful," he said. "What a beautiful scheme. And beautifully executed, too. Right down to the character of the 'legitimate' C.I.A. man. You'd just naturally think anyone that crude would have to be what he claimed to be. It's the smooth ones you always distrust."

"I suppose," I said somewhat testily, "you could look at it that way." I hadn't expected him to heap praise on the conspirators, and it annoyed me when he did. "Will you arrest Michael now or will you need reinforcements first?"

Stallings pretended to study the titles of the books on the shelf before him. My heart sank; I knew what was coming.

"Well, Doctor," Stallings said, "it's not quite that simple. We've been trying to get a lead on these people for some time now. And you, Doctor, are in a rather unique position to help us."

I leaned against the book stack and began to laugh. Or perhaps to cry. Sometimes it's hard to tell one from the other.

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S. J. Peters didn't sell "dirty pictures" in the usual sense of that phrase. But they were dirty and Peters was in a dirty business . . .

DOUBLE EXPOSURE

by LARRY POWELL

I HATE VISITORS' DAY. I WISH MILdred would stay home sometime, but I know she won't. She'll be here today just as she was here last Visitors' Day, and all the others since I started serving my sentence. She'll smile bravely through the wire separating us and say what she always says, "How are they treating you, dear?"

Well, this is a prison; and how does she think they are treating me, like a guest at Buckingham Palace? It's her fault I'm in here. My own stupidity helped a lot, I won't deny that, but if you want to get to the heart of the matter, Mildred is really to blame.

When she comes and sits on the other side of that wire, Mildred is playing a role. She has been playing roles all her life. At the time I first met her, she was drawing raves from society columnists for her performance as "Debutante of the Year." A few years later she undertook a more ambitious part—the lovestruck heiress who defied her family's royal command not to marry a penniless polo player. I was the polo player.

Now Mildred has cast herself as the gallant wife who stands beside her husband despite the slings and arrows of misfortune and scandal. I sense this is going to be her favorite role, eclipsing all others.

My wife's family and society friends have expressed the belief that I married Mildred for her money. I didn't. But after living with her for a year I realized that only her money could keep us together. She was like a beautiful exotic dish which attracts interest on sight but proves disappointing to the taste. She also had a number of annoying personal habits which I had somehow failed to notice before she became Mrs. Richard Hamilton.

During the second year of our marriage Mildred's cousin Kate came to visit. Kate was a dish, too, and much warmer than Mildred. We got along splendidly for the six weeks she was around—especially when Mildred wasn't. Mildred never became suspicious. The way she looked at it, I had a wife who was young, wealthy, and lovely, and only a fool would jeopardize that kind of arrangement. Okay, so I was a fool.

On the day Kate departed I told Mildred, "You'll have to ask her back again. Soon."

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"Never," said Mildred firmly. "I thought she'd never leave."

So much for Cousin Kate, the sparkling firefly who had briefly brightened the dark corners of my existence. I followed Mildred back into our old routine, or rut—dinner once a week with her high-toned family and endless parties with her high-toned friends, all of whom treated me like an enemy infiltrator.

One afternoon, as I left the gymnasium where I played handball once a week with Ronnie Norton, I collided with a wide man in a loud plaid suit.

"I'd like to talk to you, Mr. Hamilton," he said in a low voice. At the same time he slid a dirty card into my palm.

I didn't recognize the man and I could think of nothing we might have to talk about. I consulted his card. It said he was S. J. Peters, a professional photographer. The address listed for his studio was in a slovenly neighborhood on the other side of town.

Peters glanced around as if he expected some passerby to leap on him like an aroused tiger. "I can't say anything here. Contact me and we'll set up a meeting place."

I had no need for the services of a photographer, and I already had concluded that S. J. Peters was some kind of crackpot. I forgot him immediately, but he didn't forget me. He called me at home two nights later.

"You failed to get in touch," he said in a tone of mild reprimand. "I happen to have a photograph that will interest you, Mr. Hamilton."

"What sort of photograph?"

"I don't talk business over the telephone. Meet me in an hour at Hoke's Bar on 45th Street."

At that moment I began to feel uneasy. Making certain that Mildred couldn't overhear, I telephoned a newspaperman I knew. "Have you ever heard of a seedy photographer who calls himself S. J. Peters?"

"Sneaky Peters, you mean. Where did you run into a guy like that? He works around town at some of the cheaper night clubs, snapping photographs of patrons on a freelance basis. But, listen, the cops are pretty sure he's a small-time blackmailer."

I put a finger in my collar, which had suddenly grown tight. "What makes the police think so?"

"Oh, they have reasons. But they haven't been able to pin anything on him. I'll give you an example of how Peters operates. He spots a couple in a club who wouldn't want their respective spouses to know about their night on the town. He snaps a shot of them, or follows them when they leave the club, and gets an incriminating photo, then peddles it to the victims. Say, Hamilton, are you in trouble?"

"Not me," I said weakly. "A friend of mine."

More than once I had taken Kate

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to a club on the other side of town, confident that none of Mildred's acquaintances would run into us there. I didn't remember seeing S. J. Peters on those occasions, but that didn't mean Peters hadn't seen me. I recalled a night when I had planted an impulsive kiss on Kate as we danced, and another night when I had embraced her as we sat at a secluded table.

Yes, I was in trouble. Mildred would divorce me if she found out.

Suddenly I knew just how much my wife's money meant to me. I was afraid I couldn't live without it.

I had no difficulty locating Hoke's Bar on 45th Street. The shabbiest building in the block, it looked like a place where a uniformed policeman would need to watch his coat and hat. I hunched my shoulders self-consciously and went in, searching the dim interior for S. J. Peters. A large hulk shifted in a booth to the rear and an arm beckoned.

"Glad you could make it, Mr. Hamilton." Peters reached inside his plaid coat and flipped a photograph to the table. "Take a look at this print. Made it up especially for you."

Peters had snapped the picture in the night-club's parking lot; I recognized my car in the background. He hadn't caught me kissing Kate. He had caught Kate kissing me, and her enthusiasm, which had pleased me at the time, now struck me as excessive, even embarrassing —in fact, dangerous.

"How much do you want for this?"

Peters took a long drink from a mug of tap beer, swallowed loudly. He had abandoned his furtive manner of a couple of days before. He was in his own surroundings now, doing his kind of business. He grinned as he wiped his mouth. "The price for the negative is ten thousand dollars."

I winced. "I thought you were a small-time blackmailer."

"Depends on who I'm dealing with. I ask what the traffic will bear." The word "blackmailer" hadn't jarred him a bit. He was still grinning. "And don't tell me that the picture doesn't prove anything except that a girl kissed you. It proves whatever your wife wants to think it proves—and that could be plenty."

I looked at the picture again and weighed my chances of convincing Mildred that I hadn't shared Kate's enthusiasm. No chance, not with that silly satisfied expression on my face.

"You've got yourself a customer, Peters. However, I couldn't pay you ten thousand dollars if you offered me the Mona Lisa. I may look to you like a wealthy man, I may live like one, but I haven't a button of my own."

"Suit yourself. I can just as easily take the picture to your wife," Peters reminded me. He drained his beer mug and licked his lips. "You're putting me on, trying to

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whittle down my price. You drive a car as long as a yacht, Mr. Hamilton, you run around with people like Norton, the banker. You've got to be loaded."

"Actually, Ronnie Norton is more my wife's friend than mine. And Mildred is the one who is loaded. My father went bankrupt while I was still in college. He left me nothing but a polo pony and bad debts." I didn't like telling Peters my life story, but what choice did I have? "Mildred paid for my car and for everything else, including the clothes on my back. But she demands to know how I spend every dollar she gives me. I couldn't possibly ask her for such a large sum without a good explanation."

"And you wouldn't want to explain that little number in the picture, would you?" Peters chuckled. "Well, I'm surprised. I figured you had as much in the bank as your wife. Tell you what, make the price five thousand—but not one cent less. Get it up by tomorrow night or I'll call on Mrs. Hamilton and offer the picture to her."

Mildred was asleep when I got home. And snoring. That was one of her annoying habits that I hadn't known about before we married, and a beautiful woman is not beautiful when she is snoring. I sighed and went into the guest bedroom.

At the bank the next morning I cleaned out my personal checking account. It contained about three thousand dollars. Would S. J. Peters accept that sum and give me a few weeks to raise the rest? Not a monkey's chance. I looked toward Ronnie Norton's office. Ronnie was the only one of Mildred's friends I felt I could call on. I borrowed another two thousand from him, asking him to keep the loan a secret.

By nightfall I was too nervous to light a cigarette. Suppose Peters decided to get in touch with Mildred despite his promise? I didn't trust him; I didn't trust him as far as I could throw Ronnie Norton's bank.

The address on his card turned out to be a shabby apartment in a rundown building. I found a door with another of his dirty cards taped above the knob. Apparently he wasted little on overhead. My hammering on the door brought no response from inside, but a woman, a self-made redhead, appeared at the other end of the hallway.

"You won't find Mr. Peters in. He's out all times of the day and night. The nature of his business, I guess." She smiled and stroked her dye job. "You could wait in my place. I make a good cup of coffee."

I declined, and paced the hallway until Peters showed up. He had turned the living room of his apartment into an office which hadn't been swept in at least a month. Near a bloated sofa was a metal desk on which I saw a stack of brown envelopes of the type photographers used for mailing. Peters picked one up, threw it to me.

Because I didn't trust him, I

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checked the envelope's contents. The negative was there, along with an eight-by-ten print on cheap paper. Peters grinned as I handed over the money.

"You really enjoy your work, don't you?" I said.

"Only when I meet somebody like you." He seemed more amused than ever. "Call me the next time you need a good photographer."

I had the feeling he had put something over on me—something, I mean, besides selling me that stupid picture and negative for $5000.

Mildred came home from a shopping trip the following day and dropped her purse on the floor. The catch slipped and lipstick and keys spilled out—lipstick and keys and a smudged card bearing the name of S. J. Peters.

"Where did you get this?" I asked her.

"A man handed it to me. He mumbled something about making an appointment to talk to me, but I didn't pay much attention. I'd never hire a photographer who dressed the way he does."

The truth flashed through my mind. Peters had taken *another* photograph of me and Kate—or he'd held out an extra print of the negative I'd bought. He'd planned all along to collect from Mildred as soon as he had collected from me. He'd try again to make an appointment with Mildred, and next time, or the time after that, she'd listen.

I carried a revolver in my pocket when I returned to his apartment. I found him in. He looked surprised but not concerned as I moved through the door. I took out the revolver. He began to look concerned.

"Guess what I want, Mr. Peters."

"Your money back?"

"Don't kid around, Mr. Peters."

"The other picture. You mean, your wife told you! Well, I never expected that."

"Give it to me—negative and prints. And don't grin. Don't you dare grin."

He sailed an envelope at me. I squatted to pick it up. He jumped like a bullfrog, wound his arms around me. I could hardly breathe. Peters chuckled as his arms tightened. "You should have known better than to try acting tough. Now drop the gun."

I couldn't raise the revolver. My arms felt as though they were strapped to my sides. Peters was as strong as a bear. My ribs began to give. Trying to break away from him, I rammed into the sofa, fell, and Peters fell with me. The gun exploded.

I thought I'd need a jack to get out from under his weight, but I managed. Peters was dead, and no one was going to believe he had been shot by accident. I picked up the envelope and ran. In the hallway I collided with the redhead who had offered me coffee the evening before. It was she who gave the police my description, and even

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the battery of high-priced attorneys that Mildred hired couldn't save me from prison . . .

Now it's Visitors' Day again, and I can hear the guard. He rattles the door of my cell, turns the key. "Your wife's here, Hamilton."

I step out, pretending eagerness. I have to play the game Mildred's way. One of these days I'll be up before a parole board, and I'll stand a better chance of getting out if I have a devoted wife waiting for me.

Mildred smiles bravely through the wire, says what she always says, "How are they treating you, dear?"

"Great," I reply, thinking again that it was all her fault, remembering how I felt when I opened that second envelope and saw the couple in the other picture. Not the couple I expected; not Kate and me—but Mildred and Ronnie Norton.

"Can you ever forgive me, Richard?" she pleads, her eyes moist. "I feel terrible knowing you're in this place because you tried to protect me from a filthy blackmailer."

I smile a martyr's gentle smile. "All that matters, darling, is that we'll be together again some day." I'm not a bad actor myself.

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a *NEW* Mr. Strang story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

You wouldn't think it possible, even granting Mr. Strang's flair for mysteries and talent for solving them, that the science teacher of Aldershot High School could get involved in a "locked room" problem. But leave it to Leonard! And leave it to that shrewd little gnome to apply his scientific know-how to taking the "im" out of "impossible" . . .

MR. STRANG PULLS A SWITCH

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

IT WAS NEARLY 6:30 WHEN MR. Strang trudged up the steps of Mrs. Mackey's rooming house.

He was tired. His day at Aldershot High School had seemed infinitely long. In addition to his usual schedule of five classes and a study hall, the old teacher had spent a bad forty-five minutes with Mr. Guthrey, explaining to the irate principal why a science experiment had gone wrong, permeating the entire third floor with a stench unequaled since Hercules had cleansed the Augean stables.

Then, after school, he had kept an appointment with Mike Trowbridge, trying patiently to explain to that upset, nervous student why it was highly unlikely that he would receive a passing mid-year mark in general science.

Now Mr. Strang wanted nothing more than to have a bowl of hot soup and then ease his frail body into the overstuffed chair and read for an hour or so before going to bed.

As the teacher stepped through the front door he heard the telephone ringing in the kitchen.

"Mr. Strang! Mr. Strang, it's for you!" The strident voice of Mrs. Mackey, his landlady, grated on his eardrums with a sound like that of a fingernail dragged across a slate blackboard.

Mr. Strang shuffled to the kitchen and took the telephone reluctantly, favoring Mrs. Mackey with a glare that would have etched glass. "Leonard Strang speaking," he said into the mouthpiece.

"This is Walter Trowbridge—

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Mike's father," said a quavering voice. "The reason I called—well, it's about Mike."

"He got home all right, didn't he?" asked the teacher. "He left school two hours ago."

"Yes, he got home," continued the worried voice, "but would it be possible for you to come over here, Mr. Strang? Right away, I mean."

"Phoronidea!" exploded the teacher. "I just got in. I haven't even eaten yet. What seems to be the trouble?"

"Mike went up to his room a little while ago, Mr. Strang. And then he—well, he just disappeared."

"Disappeared? Then look for him, Mr. Trowbridge. He must be around somewhere. Surely you can do that much without outside help. Or are you trying to tell me that he simply vanished in a puff of smoke?"

"Oh, there wasn't any smoke, of course. Still—" There was a silence at the other end of the line. Then: "Do you believe in magic, Mr. Strang?"

"Magic? You mean *real* magic? Of course not!"

"I don't either. But one minute Mike was in his room with the door locked, and the next minute he was gone. I'm really not sure whether or not I should call the police, and I thought as a science teacher, you might—"

"Mr. Trowbridge, I've had a hard day," said the teacher. "Are you sure this isn't a joke of some kind?"

"Mr. Strang," replied Trowbridge in a voice edged with hysteria, "Mike is gone, I tell you. That's not the type of thing I joke about."

"I'll be right over," said the teacher quietly.

Mr. Strang placed the receiver back in its cradle and turned to Mrs. Mackey.

"He just disappeared," he said in amazement. "Out of a locked room."

And with that astonished remark the gnomelike teacher walked out the door, leaving his landlady wondering whether Mr. Strang had taken leave of his senses.

Ten minutes later Mr. Strang's battered purple car pulled up to the curb in front of the Trowbridge home, a rambling fieldstone and clapboard house. The teacher jabbed at the doorbell impatiently and listened to several bars of *Home, Sweet Home* as they chimed beyond the thick door.

The door opened. "Come in, Mr. Strang," said the same voice the teacher had heard over the telephone.

Walter Trowbridge almost filled the doorway. Looking up at his face, Mr. Strang was reminded of the picture of a bulldog he had seen recently. Clearly here was a man who stood for no nonsense. But judging from the tremor in his voice and the nervousness with

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which he mopped his face with a handkerchief, here was a man who was scared, perhaps terrified.

After taking the teacher's coat Trowbridge ushered him into a spacious living room. A slender woman in a plain black dress was seated on the sofa.

"This is my wife Alice, Mr. Strang," said Trowbridge.

The teacher shook her offered hand and noticed it was trembling.

"Alice was seated right where she is now, facing those stairs, when Mike—when Mike vanished," said Trowbridge, pointing to the steps at the far end of the room. "So you see, he couldn't have come down here even if—"

"Just a moment, please," said the teacher. "If the boy's simply missing it may be a matter for the police. But you said something about his having been in a locked room."

"That's right," said Mrs. Trowbridge. "On the second floor."

"I see," said Mr. Strang, "or rather, I don't see. Suppose you start at the beginning."

"It was just—"

"I was the one who—"

"Wait a minute!" The teacher held up his hands like a referee at a football game. "You first, Mr. Trowbridge. Tell me what happened from the time Mike returned home."

"I met him at the front door and asked him where he'd been. He said he'd stayed in school to talk to you about his work."

"That checks," said Mr. Strang.

"I got after him about his marks —just as I have to do nearly every day," Trowbridge went on. "Finally he yanked himself away from me and said he was going up to his room to run his trains."

"Trains?"

"Yes, he's got an electric-train layout in his room upstairs. They're the old three-rail kind, and he's put in about a mile of track with little houses and everything. It always surprised us that he could find a place for his bed."

"I see," nodded the teacher. "You were saying that Mike *yanked* himself away from you."

"Just like that. While I was still talking to him. That's a hell of a way for a boy to act toward his own father, isn't it, Mr. Strang?"

"Walter!" cried Mrs. Trowbridge. "We asked Mr. Strang here to help us find Mike, not involve him in a family argument."

"Sure, Alice. Anyway, I went upstairs right after Mike, but he slammed into his room and locked the door. I shouted for him to open up, but he just yelled at me to go away. Then I heard him start the trains. For about five minutes I could hear him in there, starting an engine, stopping it, switching—things like that.

"He still wouldn't open the door, so I asked Alice what she thought we ought to do. She was outside trimming some rosebushes directly below the window of Mike's room."

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"What did you decide?" asked Mr. Strang.

"We agreed that Walter should just sit outside that door until Mike opened it," said Mrs. Trowbridge. "I knew that sooner or later Mike would get hungry and come out. We came back into the house, and I sat right here where I could see the stairs when the two of them finally came down."

"Was Mike still in his room when you got back to his door?" Mr. Strang asked Trowbridge.

"Yes, I could hear him running the trains, just like before. He did a lot of starting and stopping, so I knew he must be angry. When things are going all right for him he just lets the train run round and round without working the controls much. I must have stood out there for fifteen or twenty minutes."

"Then what?"

"I heard something crash inside Mike's room," said Trowbridge. "I wasn't about to let him wreck the whole house just because he didn't like me talking to him about his marks, so I ordered him to open the door. He didn't answer. I noticed that the trains had stopped, too. I guess that's when I lost my temper."

"And—"

"I started kicking at the door," said Trowbridge. "It's made of light wood. I kept banging away at it until the lock broke. Then I went inside."

Trowbridge took a deep breath. "There was nobody in the room, Mr. Strang!" he burst out. "Mike was gone. In the time it took me to break down that door, Mike had just—just disappeared!"

Mr. Strang ran slender fingers through his sparse crop of gray hair. "I don't suppose the window —" he began.

"It was locked," said Trowbridge, "from the inside. And besides, there's a twenty-foot drop to the ground."

"Any other exits?" asked the teacher.

Trowbridge shook his head.

"Walter, wouldn't it be better if Mr. Strang saw the room?" asked Mrs. Trowbridge.

Trowbridge nodded and led the way to the stairs, followed by his wife and the teacher. When they reached the top step he indicated an open door at one end of the hallway. "That's Mike's room," he said.

As they entered the room Mr. Strang noticed that the spring lock on the inside of the door had been torn away from the wood, leaving splinters on the floor. As Trowbridge had said, the room was filled with electric-train apparatus mounted on large sheets of plywood raised about three feet above the floor.

In a roundhouse at one end, two miniature Deisel locomotives were waiting to be sent on their way. Farther on, a tiny village looked

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exceedingly lifelike, right down to the figure of a postman having his ankle nipped by a plastic dog not more than half an inch long. There were houses and shops, a rustic station, crossings and tunnels and turnpikes. Plaster had been laid over chicken wire and then painted to look like a rugged mountain.

"Why, it's superb!" marveled the teacher, looking at an outcropping of "rock" which indicated a certain familiarity with geological formations. "Did Mike do all this himself?"

"Yes, Alice and I don't have much time to play with trains," replied Trowbridge. "We always said that if the time he wasted just wiring those trains had been spent on studying, he'd be on the honor roll right now. I even had to have a special electric circuit put in, just for this room."

Mrs. Trowbridge pointed to some pieces of broken pottery on the floor under the corner of one of the tables. "That mess used to be a bust of George Washington," she said. "Mike won it at a shooting gallery when we visited the carnival last year."

"I figure that must have been the crash I heard," explained Trowbridge. "What do you think, Mr. Strang?"

But the teacher seemed more interested in what was on the table above the clay fragments. At this point the track came near the edge and then made a tight turn, almost doubling back on itself. Next to the track, on the inside of the turn, a train lay on its side. The train was made up primarily of freight cars; their contents—carloads of lead fishing sinkers—had spilled out, overturning several tiny trees. A derrick was mounted on one of the cars, and the derrick's arm stuck straight out.

Mr. Strang walked across the room, sat on the bed, and considered the control system. He reached out and touched one of the twin transformers.

"Anthropoda!" he yipped, snatching his hand away. "That thing is still hot!"

"I guess I never thought to turn it off," said Trowbridge sheepishly.

"Umm." The teacher tapped the side of his nose slowly with an index finger. Then he peered at the Trowbridges over the top of his black-rimmed glasses.

"Mind if I run the trains?" he asked, grinning shyly.

"'Now look, Mr. Strang, I asked you here to help find Mike, not to—"

"Walter, don't be rude."

"Ah!" Trowbridge threw up his hands. "I told you we should have called the police first thing."

"You may be glad you didn't," said the teacher, waving an admonishing finger. "But if it'll make you feel any better, Mr. Trowbridge, I'm not playing. I intend to perform a controlled scientific experiment."

Trowbridge shrugged helplessly.

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Mr. Strang returned to the train table, detached the engine from the rest of the derailed train, and placed it on the track. There was a click as the contacts underneath the engine touched the track, and a tiny light glowed in the cab. The engine was motionless, but gave off a slight humming sound.

Mr. Strang went back to the controls and touched a button on one transformer. As he pressed down, the humming stopped and the cab light went out.

"Did you break it?" asked Trowbridge.

"No, this button cuts off the electricity to the track. There's a control inside the engine that operates every time that happens," replied Mr. Strang. "Watch."

He released the button. The light went on again, and the engine moved slowly—in reverse.

Again the teacher pushed the button. The lights went off and the engine stopped, as if awaiting further instructions. This time when Mr. Strang took his finger off the button the engine remained motionless.

When the button was pushed and released a third time, the engine finally started forward. It crawled along the outermost rim of the web of tracks, taking a full minute to return to where Mr. Strang had originally placed it.

"Interesting," said the teacher.

"What's interesting?" demanded Trowbridge.

"There are eight switches in this setup. They're easy to operate. See?" Mr. Strang touched several other buttons, and as he did, switches snapped into new positions all along the track. The train started again, but this time it took a shortcut through the miniature town.

"Eight switches had to be set exactly right to send the train the longest possible way," said the teacher. "Doesn't it make you wonder why that particular route was selected? Mike had an almost infinite variety of other routes he could use."

"Just coincidence," scoffed Trowbridge. "Look, we're getting nowhere, Mr. Strang. I'm going to call the police as I should have done in the first place. It's easy enough to figure out what happened here."

"What?" asked the teacher innocently.

"Somebody must have gotten into this room," replied Trowbridge. "Whoever it was grabbed Mike, and while they struggled the bust of Washington fell to the floor. The train was still running, but when it reached the curve it went off the track. That's why the transformer was still on. Whoever it was took Mike out—somehow—before I could get in to help him."

"You were outside the door of the room," said Mr. Strang calmly, "and the window was shut and locked on the inside. How do you

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suggest this mysterious someone got in here? Or got out?"

"I don't know. That's for the police to determine."

"And what do you say, Mrs. Trowbridge?"

"I—I'm afraid I'll have to agree with my husband, Mr. Strang. I can't explain how it happened, but it must have been the way Walter said."

"Uh huh." Mr. Strang nodded. "Well, if you must, you must. But before you rush off to make complete idiots of yourselves—"

"Now just a minute!"

"I repeat—complete idiots of yourselves. Before you do that might I point out just one fallacy in your reconstruction?"

"What's that?"

"You imply that the train was thrown off the track because it probably came into the curve too fast. If that were the case, centrifugal force would have thrown it to the outside of the curve. Correct?"

Trowbridge nodded in agreement and then turned to look at the engineless train lying on its side—on the inside edge of the curve.

"Well, then," Trowbridge said slowly, "how *did* Mike disappear? Have you got any idea, Mr. Strang?"

"How? Oh, that's easy. It's the *why* that bothers me. But I think I know that, too. Suppose we go downstairs and discuss it."

"But what about Mike?" asked Mr. Trowbridge. "How do we know he's safe—wherever he is?"

"Oh, Mike's safe enough," chuckled the teacher. "A bit uncomfortable perhaps, but safe."

The Trowbridges followed Mr. Strang into the living room. They sat down, and the teacher stoked up his massive briar pipe, sending clouds of foul-smelling fumes into the air.

"I suppose this whole thing is partly my fault," he began. "You see, when Mike stopped in to see me after school I told him his chances of passing science were pretty poor."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I was rather hard on him," Mr. Strang went on. "I never saw a person so dejected. But after he left I went over his record. It was quite revealing."

"Revealing? How?" asked Mr. Trowbridge.

"This year," said the teacher, "Mike had the choice of one elective class and he signed up for art. But there was a note at the bottom of the schedule card that you refused to give him permission to take that class, Mr. Trowbridge."

"Of course not! If he's going to study law the way we planned, he doesn't need—"

"The second time around, Mike chose mechanical drawing. Again you refused permission. He finally took a foreign language—and his marks there are well below passing."

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"Now hold on a minute," said Trowbridge. "Let's understand one thing, Mr. Strang. I want Mike to go to college. I never had the chance myself. And a language will give him a better chance of getting accepted than just learning to draw pictures. If he wasn't so lazy—"

"Yes, I'm sure your motives were good ones," replied the teacher, "but he won't even be graduated from high school with the marks he's been getting. And lazy? Mike? Platyhelminthes, that boy of yours tries harder than any other student at Aldershot High School. He simply can't cope with the work, Mr. Trowbridge."

Mr. Strang paused for breath. "I did notice one interesting thing, however," he went on. "Mike's taking a required shop class—and in that his mark is 95."

"This is all very fine, Mr. Strang," said Mrs. Trowbridge anxiously, "but what does it have to do with Mike's disappearance?"

"It tells me why it happened," said the teacher. "You see, Mrs. Trowbridge, I don't believe Mike was abducted as your husband thinks. I think he arranged the 'disappearance' himself."

"But why?" asked Trowbridge.

"Think about it," said the teacher. "Obviously Mike has little academic ability. He takes the prescribed college entrance courses because you, his parents, force him to—and in spite of his striving he gets low marks. And yet this same boy has great aptitude and interest in mechanical and artistic things. That model-train setup in his room is ample proof of that—it's one of the most remarkable things I've ever seen.

"Mike was not allowed to take the courses he was really interested in. And it was constantly drummed into him that he had to study harder—that he was a failure because he couldn't accomplish what you wanted him to. According to your own admission, Mr. Trowbridge, the last time you actually saw Mike you were berating him because of his low marks. I think that finally he'd had enough. He decided to do something quite typical of children—even of children in their teens."

"And what did he decide to do?" asked Mrs. Trowbridge.

"Run away from home."

"Run away?" said Trowbridge in astonishment. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"Mike was old enough to know you'd take precisely that attitude if he just packed up and left," said the teacher. "Furthermore, he knew that sooner or later he'd have to return. Then you'd merely laugh at him, and the quarreling and bickering over marks would start all over again. So he had to do something to frighten you. I'd say," Mr. Strang concluded with a smile, "that he succeeded admirably."

Trowbridge turned to his wife. "I guess I have been pretty hard on

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the boy," he agreed. "Maybe you're right, Mr. Strang. Maybe college isn't for him."

"And is that such a bad thing? Is it worth making the boy miserable—perhaps for the rest of his life—to prepare him for a career in which he has neither interest nor ability?"

"Okay, so Mike ran away," said Trowbridge. "That I can understand, even if I don't approve of it. Now tell me, Mr. Strang, how did he get out of his room? Just before I heard him in there running the trains. A few seconds later he was gone, and the window was locked on the inside."

"The trains. We always come back to the trains, don't we?" said the teacher. "Let's begin by reviewing what actually happened. Mike entered his room. You went outside to consult with your wife and when you got back you heard—what?"

"I heard Mike putting the train through its paces—stopping and starting—for at least fifteen minutes. Then there was this crash and—"

"Did your son say anything at all to you after you returned from outside?"

"No, we were both angry, and both of us tend to clam up when we feel that way."

Mr. Strang reached into a jacket pocket and produced his black-rimmed glasses. Polishing the lenses on his necktie he waved the glasses about dramatically.

"I'm sure, Mr. Trowbridge," he began in his best classroom manner, "that when you returned to the door of his room, Mike couldn't have spoken to you if you had suddenly become the most sympathetic and understanding father in the world—for the simple reason that he was no longer in the room!"

"What do you mean?"

"That was the only opportunity he had to leave," said the teacher, "while you were talking with Mrs. Trowbridge. He undoubtedly set the spring lock on the door to snap into place after he'd left. Your 'locked room' is as simple as that."

"But I *heard*—"

"You heard the train," said Mr. Strang. "There's no denying that. However Mike wasn't in the room to operate it."

"But the starting and stopping—and the crash?"

"Yes, the crash," said Mr. Strang. "The idea of a mysterious disappearance must have occurred to Mike the moment he entered the room—that is, if he hadn't planned it all beforehand. He had plenty of time to set things up before you left to talk to your wife. Actually, what did he need to convince you he was still inside the room? Only the sound of a train running and, after about fifteen minutes, a crash to startle you into forcing your way into the room."

"That's quite a bit for Mike to handle if, as you say, he wasn't

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even in his room," said Trowbridge.

"The crash was easy to accomplish. The curve in the track, remember, came almost to the edge of the table. Now suppose the bust of Washington were balanced precariously at that point. What would happen?"

"Nothing. Not unless the bust was actually on the track. And then it would only stop the train. And as close as that curve comes to the edge, the Washington bust couldn't have been *on* the track and balanced *on* the edge of the table, too."

"True. But picture that wrecked train in your mind, Mr. Trowbridge. Among the cars there was a rather special one."

"The derrick car!"

"Exactly. And the arm of the derrick was sticking out. Furthermore, the train was weighted with lead. It went into the curve, and the arm of the derrick swept the Father of His Country off the table, whereupon it fell to the floor and smashed. At the same time the derrick car was pushed in the opposite direction because of the weight of the bust. The train came off the track—on the inside of the curve."

"But that was fifteen minutes after I got back to the door," said Trowbridge. "How could Mike have been running that train that long and still kept it away from the curve—if he wasn't even in the room?"

"I remarked earlier," said the teacher, "on the fact that the track switches were set to make the train go the longest possible route."

"Yes, but the train still took only a minute to go around it."

"True. Do you remember, though, how the train's direction was controlled?"

"Sure. You pushed the button on the transformer. Each time you pushed it the train did a different thing—back up, stop, forward, stop."

"Remember that cycle," said Mr. Strang. "It never varies. If the train is going forward and you want to reverse it, for example, you have to push the button twice. It's quite predictable."

"Spare me a lecture, Mr. Strang," said Trowbridge. "Just tell me how Mike was able to control that train from outside the room. After all, I did hear it start and stop many times. I suppose Mike just reached through a solid wall and pushed the button, huh?"

"All that pushing the button accomplishes is to cut off the electricity to the track; a solenoid switch inside the engine does the rest. One could just as easily change the direction of the train by unplugging the transformer and then plugging it in again."

"But the transformer plug is inside the room, too," objected Trowbridge.

"I was just giving an example," said the teacher impatiently.

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"Think of the rest of the house, not of Mike's room alone. Where is the one other place the electricity in that room could be switched off and on?"

"Why, there isn't—wait a minute! The fuse box down in the basement!"

"Bravo!" said Mr. Strang. "Mike set up the bust of Washington and then crept down to the basement while you were outside. After you returned he kept the train moving backward and forward along that outside track by screwing and unscrewing the fuse. He could keep that up for quite some time without sending the train into the curve; besides, the long outer track gave him plenty of leeway. And since the room has its own circuit, his connecting and disconnecting that one fuse wouldn't be noticed in the rest of the house. Incidentally, I'm sure if you look in your basement you'll find your son hiding there right now."

There was a long pause. Then Alice Trowbridge began to giggle. "He's probably gorging himself on the ginger ale and potato chips we keep down there," she said. "He won't want a thing for supper."

"The fuse—that's the third one," murmured her husband thoughtfully.

"The third what?" asked the teacher.

"Switch. There were the ones on the track. Then the solenoid in the engine. Now there's a fuse screwed in and out to switch the electricity on and off."

He walked purposefully toward the door to the basement. "And now there's going to be a fourth."

"Switch? Surely you're not going to beat the boy," said Mr. Strang.

"No, but I've been thinking. Maybe a kid who can plan something like this fuse gimmick would benefit from mechanical drawing. Or even from art. The fourth switch I was thinking of is the one we'll be making in Mike's high-school program."

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To write a story of less than 1000 words and despite this brevity to develop a full plot is a formidable challenge to craftsmanship. Here is a prime specimen . . .

THE REWARD

by ERNEST FRANK

MR. PRATINER SAT LEISURELY IN an easy chair in the lobby of the fashionable Hotel Roma. A cigarette hung between his lips and he thumbed through a newspaper. Suddenly he sat up straight and read the following:

LOST

At the Casino or on the way from the Casino to the Hotel Negresco a golden bracelet with rubies and diamonds. Please return for high reward. Hotel Negresco, Room 625.

Mr. Pratiner's face tightened. Carefully he tore a piece out of the paper and put it in his pocket. Then he headed for the *Prefecture de police.*

"Can I help you, M'sieu?" the desk sergeant asked.

Mr. Pratiner took the clipping out of his pocket.

"I happened to read this stating that a valuable bracelet was lost last night," he answered.

"That's right," the police officer replied "We got the report this morning."

"I found the bracelet," Mr. Pratiner said, "and I want to return it personally to the lady who lost it."

"Of course, M'sieu, there is nothing wrong with that." The sergeant gave him a meaningful smile. "You will make the acquaintance of a most charming Parisienne. She's at the Negresco."

"I know. That's what the paper says. I came here because I have a personal request. I would like one of your plainclothes detectives to accompany me."

"Well, well! Are you afraid of a *tete-a-tete?"*

"By no means! But one never can tell. A witness might come in very handy."

"As you wish, M'sieu," the offi-

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cer said politely, though he did not understand the request of this gentleman, especially in view of the fact that he was about to meet one of those creatures whom nature had blessed with heavenly beauty. "Detective Leroy will accompany you."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

A short while later Mr. Pratiner met Mademoiselle Lucienne face to face. She wore a flowery robe. With beaming eyes she asked, "Oh, M'sieu, you bring my bracelet?"

"I do," Mr. Pratiner answered, producing the piece of jewelry. "Quite a treasure. And it *is* your bracelet? You are sure, aren't you?"

"Of course I am sure. It *is* my bracelet. Oh, you cannot imagine the grief I felt when I realized that I had lost it. This bracelet is a dear keepsake, M'sieu."

"All the more do I enjoy the fact that I can return it to you."

"Thank you, M'sieu," Lucienne said. She lowered her eyes. "I don't know how to express myself. I feel embarrassed to mention the reward—"

"Because of the reward I asked this gentleman to come with me," Mr. Pratiner said with a slight bow toward the plainclothes detective "In his presence we shall come to an agreement much faster. Am I right, M'sieu Leroy?"

"M'sieu, are you going to ask so much that you need an arbitrator?" Lucienne asked, looking at him coquettishly.

"On the contrary, Mademoiselle Lucienne."

"Well, then, how much do you expect? I am willing to agree to any reasonable demand if only I get my bracelet back."

"I am not unreasonable, Mademoiselle," Mr. Pratiner said calmly. "Besides, it was not so difficult to find your bracelet."

"Where did you find it?"

"Where do you think I found it, Mademoiselle?"

"At the Casino," Lucienne said excitedly. "I thought that I lost it there. There was such a crowd at the checkroom—"

"A crowd indeed!" A strange smile played around Mr. Pratiner's lips. "So many people come to enjoy the carnival at Nice. There is so much pushing and shoving, and in this pushing your bracelet could easily have fallen into the inner pocket of my tuxedo."

Lucienne stared at him in horror.

"What, what do you say?"

"Yes. When you stole my wallet from the inner pocket of my tuxedo your bracelet slid off your wrist, Mademoiselle" There was a moment's silence. Then Mr. Pratiner continued, "If you will return my wallet, with its contents intact, that is all the reward I expect. Everything else I can leave to this gentleman, Detective Leroy. I hope you now understand why I did not come alone, Mademoiselle."

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FIRST PRIZE WINNER NUMBER 5

John Dickson Carr's First Prize Winner of 1949 is so unusual—such a rare reading experience in the field of ratiocination—that we have decided to withhold editorial comment until after you have finished the story. So—happy and provocative reading! . . .

THE GENTLEMAN FROM PARIS

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Carlton House Hotel,
Broadway, New-York,
14th April, 1849

My dear brother:

Were my hand more steady, Maurice, or my soul less agitated, I should have written to you before this. *All is safe*: so much I tell you at once. For the rest, I seek sleep in vain; and this is not merely because I find myself a stranger and a foreigner in New-York. Listen and judge.

We discussed, I think, the humiliation that a Frenchman must go to England ere he could take passage in a reliable ship for America. The *Britannia* steam-packet departed from Liverpool on the second of the month, and arrived here on the seventeenth. Do not smile, I implore you, when I tell you that my first visit on American soil was to Platt's Saloon, under Wallack's Theatre.

Great God, that voyage!

On my stomach I could hold not even champagne. For one of my height and breadth I was weak as a child.

"Be good enough," I said to a furcapped coachman, when I had struggled through the horde of Irish immigrants, "to drive me to some fashionable place of refreshment."

The coachman had no difficulty in understanding my English, which pleased me. And how extraordinary are these "saloons"!

The saloon of M. Platt was loud with the thump of hammers cracking ice, which is delivered in large blocks. Though the hand-coloured gas-globes, and the rose-paintings on the front of the bar-counter, were as fine as we could see at the Three Provincial Brothers in Paris, yet I confess that the place did not smell so agree-

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ably. A number of gentlemen, wearing hats perhaps a trifle taller than is fashionable at home, lounged at the bar-counter and shouted. I attracted no attention until I called for a sherry cobbler.

One of the "bartenders," as they are called in New-York, gave me a sharp glance as he prepared the glass.

"Just arrived from the Old Country, I bet?" said he in no unfriendly tone.

Though it seemed strange to hear France mentioned in this way, I smiled and bowed assent.

"Italian, maybe?" said he.

This bartender, of course, could not know how deadly was the insult.

"Sir," I replied, "I am a Frenchman."

And now in truth he was pleased! His fat face opened and smiled like a distorted, gold-toothed flower.

"Is that so, now!" he exclaimed. "And what might your name be? Unless"—and here his face darkened with that sudden defensiveness and suspicion which, for no reason I can discern, will often strike into American hearts—"unless," said he, "you don't want to give it?"

"Not at all," I assured him earnestly. "I am Armand de Lafayette, at your service."

My dear brother, what an extraordinary effect!

It was silence. All sounds, even the faint whistling of the gas-jets, seemed to die away in that stone-flagged room. Every man along the line of the bar was looking at me. I was conscious only of faces, mostly with whiskers under the chin instead of down the cheek-bones, turned to me.

"Well, well, well!" almost sneered the bartender. "You wouldn't be no relation of the *Marquis* de Lafayette, would you?"

It was my turn to be astonished. Though our father has always forbidden us to mention the name of our late uncle, due to his republican sympathies, yet I knew he occupied small place in the history of France and it puzzled me to comprehend how these people had heard of him.

"The late Marquis de Lafayette," I was obliged to admit, "was my uncle."

"You better be careful, young feller," suddenly yelled a grimy little man with a pistol buckled under his long coat. "We don't like being diddled, we don't."

"Sir," I replied, taking my bundle of papers from my pocket and whacking them down on the bar-counter, "have the goodness to examine my credentials. Should you still doubt my identity, we can then debate the matter in any way which pleases you."

"This is furrin writing," shouted the bartender. "*I* can't read it!"

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And then—how sweet was the musical sound on my ear!—I heard a voice addressing me in my own language.

"Perhaps, sir," said the voice, in excellent French and with great stateliness, "I may be able to render you some small service."

The newcomer, a slight man of dark complexion, drawn up under an old shabby cloak of military cut, stood a little way behind me. If I had met him on the boulevards, I might not have found him very prepossessing. He had a wild and wandering eye, with an even wilder shimmer of brandy. He was not very steady on his feet. And yet, Maurice, his manner! It was such that I instinctively raised my hat, and the stranger very gravely did the same.

"And to whom," said I, "have I the honour ... ?"

"I am Thaddeus Perley, sir, at your service."

"Another furriner!" said the grimy little man, in disgust.

"I am indeed a foreigner," said M. Perley in English. "A foreigner to this dram-shop. A foreigner to this neighbourhood. A foreigner to—" Here he paused, and his eyes acquired an almost frightening blaze of loathing. "Yet I never heard that the speaking or reading of French was so *very* singular an accomplishment."

Imperiously—and yet, it seemed to me, with a certain shrinking nervousness—M. Perley came closer and lifted the bundle of papers.

"Doubtless," he said loftily, "I should not be credited were I to translate these. But here," and he scanned several of the papers, "is a letter of introduction in English. It is addressed to President Zachary Taylor from the American minister at Paris."

Again, my brother, what an enormous silence! It was interrupted by a cry from the bartender, who had snatched the documents from M. Perley.

"Boys, this is no diddle," said he. "This gent is the real thing!"

"He ain't!" thundered the little grimy man, with incredulity.

"He is!" said the bartender. "I'll be a son of a roe (*i.e., biche*) if he ain't!"

Well, Maurice, you and I have seen how Paris mobs can change. Americans are even more emotional. In the wink of an eye hostility became frantic affection. My back was slapped, my hand wrung, my person jammed against the bar by a crowd fighting to order me more refreshment.

The name of Lafayette, again and again, rose like a holy diapason. In vain I asked why this should be so. They appeared to think I was joking, and roared with laughter. I thought of M. Thaddeus Perley, as one who could supply an explanation.

But in the first rush towards

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me M. Perley had been flung backwards. He fell sprawling in some wet stains of tobacco-juice on the floor, and now I could not see him at all. For myself, I was weak from lack of food. A full beaker of whisky, which I was obliged to drink because all eyes were on me, made my head reel. Yet I felt compelled to raise my voice above the clamour.

"Gentlemen," I implored them, "will you hear me?"

"Silence for Lafayette!" said a big but very old man, with faded red whiskers. He had tears in his eyes, and he had been humming a catch called *Yankee Doodle*. "Silence for Lafayette!"

"Believe me," said I, "I am full of gratitude for your hospitality. But I have business in New-York, business of immediate and desperate urgency. If you will allow me to pay my reckoning—"

"Your money's no good here, monseer," said the bartender. "You're going to get liquored-up good and proper."

"But I have no wish, believe me, to become liquored-up—it might well endanger my mission! In effect, I wish to go!"

"Wait a minute," said the little grimy man, with a cunning look. "What *is* this here business?"

You, Maurice, have called me quixotic. I deny this. You have also called me imprudent. Perhaps you are right; but what choice was left to me?

"Has any gentleman here," I asked, "heard of Madame Thevenet? Madame Thevenet, who lives at number 23 Thomas Street, near Hudson Street?"

I had not, of course, expected an affirmative reply. Yet, in addition to one or two snickers at mention of the street, several nodded their heads.

"Old miser woman?" asked a sportif character, who wore chequered trousers.

"I regret, sir, that you correctly describe her. Madame Thevenet is very rich. And I have come here," cried I, "to put right a damnable injustice!"

Struggle as I might, I could not free myself.

"How's that?" asked half a dozen.

"Madame Thevenet's daughter, Mademoiselle Claudine, lives in the worst of poverty at Paris. Madame herself has been brought here, under some spell, by a devil of a woman calling herself .. Gentlemen, I implore you!"

"And I bet you," cried the little grimy man, "you're sweet on this daughter what's-her-name?" He seemed delighted. "Ain't you, now?"

How, I ask of all Providence, could these people have surprised my secret? Yet I felt obliged to tell the truth.

"I will not conceal from you," I said, "that I have in truth a high regard for Mlle. Claudine.

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But this lady, believe me, is engaged to a friend of mine, an officer of artillery."

"Then what do you *get* out of it? Eh?" asked the grimy little man, with another cunning look.

The question puzzled me. I could not reply. But the bartender with the gold teeth leaned over to me.

"If you want to see the old Frenchie alive, monseer," said he, "you'd better git." (*Sic,* Maurice). "I hearn tell she had a stroke this morning."

But a dozen voices clamoured to keep me there, though this last intelligence sent me into despair. Then up rose the big and very old man with the faded whiskers: indeed, I had never realized how old, because he seemed so hale.

"Which of you was with Washington?" said he, suddenly taking hold of the fierce little man's neckcloth, and speaking with contempt. "Make way for the nephew of Lafayette!"

They cheered me then, Armand. They hurried me to the door, they begged me to return, they promised they would await me. One glance I sought—nor can I say why—for M. Thaddeus Perley. He was sitting at a table by a pillar, under an open gas-jet; his face whiter than ever, he was still wiping stains of tobacco-juice from his cloak.

Never have I seen a more mournful prospect than Thomas Street, when my cab set me down there. Perhaps it was my state of mind; for if Mme. Thevenet had died without a sou left to her daughter—you conceive it?

The houses of Thomas Street were faced with dingy yellow brick, and a muddy sky hung over the chimney-pots. It had been warm all day, yet I found my spirit intolerably oppressed. Though heaven knows our Parisian streets are dirty enough, we do not allow pigs in them. Except for these, nothing moved in the forsaken street have a blind street-musician, with his dog and an instrument called a banjo; but even he was silent too.

For some minutes, it seemed to me, I plied the knocker at number 23 with hideous noise. Nothing stirred. Finally, one part of the door swung open a little, as for an eye. Whereupon I heard the shifting of a floor-bolt, and both doors were swung open.

Need I say that facing me stood the woman whom we have agreed to call Mademoiselle Jezebel?

She said to me: "And then, M. Armand?"

"Madame Thevenet!" cried I. "She is still alive?"

"She is alive," replied my companion, looking up at me from under the lids of her greenish eyes. "But she is completely paralyzed."

I have never denied, Maurice,

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that Mlle. Jezebel has a certain attractiveness. She is not old or even middle-aged. Were it not that her complexion is as muddy as was the sky above us then, she would have been pretty.

"And as for Claudine," I said to her, "the daughter of madame—"

"You have come too late, M. Armand."

And well I remember that at this moment there rose up, in the mournful street outside, the tinkle of the banjo played by the street-musician. It moved closer, playing a popular catch whose words run something thus:

Oh, I come from Alabama
With my banjo on my knee;
I depart for Louisiana
My Susannah for to see.

Across the lips of mademoiselle flashed a smile of peculiar quality, like a razor-cut before the blood comes.

"Gold," she whispered. "Ninety thousand persons, one hears, have gone to seek it. Go to California, M. Armand. It is the only place you will find gold."

This tune, they say, is a merry tune. It did not seem so, as the dreary twanging faded away. Mlle. Jezebel, with her muddy blonde hair parted in the middle and drawn over her ears after the best fashion, faced me implacably. Her greenish eyes were wide-open. Her old brown taffeta dress, full at the bust, narrow at the waist, rustled its wide skirts as she glided a step forward.

"Have the kindness," I said, "to stand aside. I wish to enter."

Hitherto in my life I had seen her docile and meek.

"You are no relative," she said. "I will not allow you to enter."

"In that case, I regret, I must."

"If you had ever spoken one kind word to *me,*" whispered mademoiselle, looking up from under her eyelids, and with her breast heaving, "one gesture of love—that is to say, of affection—you might have shared five million francs."

"Stand aside, I say!"

"As it is, you prefer a doll-faced consumptive at Paris. So be it!"

I was raging, Maurice; I confess it; yet, I drew myself up with coldness.

"You refer, perhaps to Claudine Thevenet?"

"And to whom else?"

"I might remind you, mademoiselle, that the lady is pledged to my good friend Lieutenant Delage. I have forgotten her."

"Have you?" asked our Jezebel, with her eyes on my face and a strange hungry look in them. "Well, she will die. Unless you can solve a mystery."

"A mystery?"

"I should not have said mystery, M. Armand. Because it is impossible of all solution. It is an Act of God!"

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Up to this time the glass-fronted doors of the vestibule had stood open behind her, against a darkness of closed shutters in the house. There breathed out of it an odour of unswept carpets, a sourness of stale living. Someone was approaching, carrying a lighted candle.

"Who speaks," called a man's voice; shaky, but as French as Mlle. Jezebel's. "Who speaks concerning an Act of God?"

I stepped across the threshold. Mademoiselle, who never left my side, immediately closed and locked the front doors. As the candle-glimmer moved still closer in gloom, I could have shouted for joy to see the man who (as I correctly guessed) I had come to meet.

"You are M. Duroc, the lawyer!" I said. "You are my brother's friend!"

M. Duroc held the candle higher, to inspect me.

He was a big, heavy man who seemed to sag in all his flesh. In compensation for his bald head, the greyish-brown moutache flowed down and parted into two hairy fans of beard on either side of his chin. He looked at me through oval gold-rimmed spectacles; in a friendly way, but yet frightened. His voice was deep and gruff, clipping the syllables, despite his fright.

"And you—" *clip-clip;* the candle-holder trembled—"you are Armand de Lafayette. I had expected you by the steam-packet today. Well! You are here. On a fool's errand, I regret."

"But why?" (And I shouted it at him, Maurice.)

I looked at mademoiselle, who was faintly smiling.

"M. Duroc!" I protested. "You wrote to my brother. You said you had persuaded madame to repent of her harshness towards her daughter!"

"Was that your duty?" asked the Jezebel, looking full at M. Duroc with her greenish eyes. "Was that your right?"

"I am a man of law," said M. Duroc. The deep monosyllables rapped, in ghostly bursts, through his parted beard. "I am correct. Very correct! And yet—"

"Who nursed her?" asked the Jezebel. "Who soothed her, fed her, wore her filthy clothes, calmed her tempers, endured her interminable abuse? *I* did!"

And yet, all the time she was speaking, this woman kept sidling and sliding against me, brushing my side, as though she would make sure of my presence there.

"Well!" said the lawyer. "It matters little now! This mystery ..."

You may well believe that all these cryptic remarks, as well as reference to a mystery or an Act of God, had driven me almost frantic. I demanded to know what he meant.

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"Last night," said M. Duroc, "a certain article disappeared."

"Well, well?"

"It disappeared," said M. Duroc, drawn up like a grenadier. "But it could not conceivably have disappeared. I myself swear this! Our only suggestions as to how it might have disappeared are a toy rabbit and a barometer."

"Sir," I said, "I do not wish to be discourteous. But—"

"Am I mad, you ask?"

I bowed. If any man can manage at once to look sagging and uncertain, yet stately and dignified, M. Duroc managed it then. And dignity won, I think.

"Sir," he replied, gesturing with the candle towards the rear of the house, "Madame Thevenet lies there in her bed. She is paralyzed. She can move only her eyes or partially the lips, without speech. Do you wish to see her?"

"If I am permitted."

"Yes. That would be correct. Accompany me."

And I saw the poor old woman, Maurice. Call her harridan if you like.

It was a square room of good size, whose shutters had remained closed and locked for years. Can one smell rust? In that room, with faded green wall-paper, I felt I could.

One solitary candle did little more than dispel shadow. It burned atop the mantelpiece well opposite the foot of the bed; and a shaggy man, whom I afterwards learned to be a police-officer, sat in a green-upholstered arm-chair by an unlighted coal fire in the fireplace grate, picking his teeth with a knife.

"If you please, Dr. Harding!" M. Duroc called softly in English.

The long and lean American doctor, who had been bending over the bed so as to conceal from our sight the head and shoulders of Madame Thevenet, turned round. But this cadaverous body —in such fashion were madame's head and shoulders propped up against pillows—his cadaverous body, I say, still concealed her face.

"Has there been any change?" persisted M. Duroc in English.

"There has been no change," replied the dark-complexioned Dr. Harding, "except for the worse."

"Do you want her to be moved?"

"There has never been any necessity," said the physician, picking up his beaver hat from the bed. He spoke dryly. "However, if you want to learn anything more about the toy rabbit or the barometer, you should hurry. The lady will die in a matter of hours, probably less."

And he stood to one side.

It was a heavy bed with four posts and a canopy. The bed-curtains, of some dullish-green material, were closely drawn on every side except the long side by

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which we saw Madame Thevenet in profile. Lean as a post, rigid, the strings of her cotton nightcap tightly tied under her chin, Madame Thevenet lay propped up there. But one eye rolled towards us, and it rolled horribly.

Up to this time the woman we call the Jezebel had said little. She chose this moment again to come brushing against my side. Her greenish eyes, lids half-closed, shone in the light of M. Duroc's candle. What she whispered was: "You don't really hate me, do you?"

Maurice, I make a pause here. Since I wrote the sentence, I put down my pen, and pressed my hands over my eyes, and once more I thought. But let me try again.

I spent just two hours in the bedroom of Madame Thevenet. At the end of the time—oh, you shall hear why!—I rushed out of that bedroom, and out of number 23 Thomas Street, like the maniac I was.

The streets were full of people, of carriages, of omnibuses, at early evening. Knowing no place of refuge save the saloon from which I had come, I gave its address to a cab-driver. Since I had still swallowed no food, I may have been light-headed. Yet I wished to pour out my heart to the friends who had bidden me return there. And where were they now?

A new group, all new, lounged against the bar-counter under brighter gaslight and brighter paint. Of all those who smote me on the back and cheered, none remained save the ancient giant who had implied friendship with General Washington. *He,* alas, lay helplessly drunk with his head near a sawdust spitting-box. Nevertheless, I was so moved that I took the liberty of thrusting a handful of bank-notes into his pocket. He alone remained.

Wait, there was another!

I do not believe he had remained there because of me. Yet M. Thaddeus Perley, still sitting alone at the little table by the pillar, with the open gas-jet above, stared vacantly at the empty glass in his hand.

He had named himself a foreigner; he was probably French. That was as well. For, as I lurched against the table, I was befuddled and all English had fled my wits.

"Sir," said I, "will you permit a madman to share your table?"

M. Perley gave a great start, as though roused out of thought. He was now sober: this I saw. Indeed, his shiver and haggard face were due to lack of stimulant rather than too much of it.

"Sir," he stammered, getting to his feet, "I shall be—I shall be honoured by your company." Automatically he opened his mouth to call for a waiter; his hand

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went to his pocket; he stopped.

"No, no, no!" said I. "If you insist, M. Perley, you may pay for the second bottle. The first is mine. I am sick at heart, and I would speak with a gentleman."

At these last words M. Perley's whole expression changed. He sat down, and gave me a grave courtly nod. His eyes, which were his most expressive feature, studied my face and my disarray.

"You are ill, M. de Lafayette," he said. "Have you so soon come to grief in this—this *civilized* country?"

"I have come to grief, yes. But not through civilization or the lack of it." And I banged my fist on the table. "I have come to grief, M. Perley, through miracles or magic. I have come to grief with a problem which no man's ingenuity can solve!"

M. Perley looked at me in a strange way. But some-one had brought a bottle of brandy, with its accessories. M. Perley's trembling hand slopped a generous allowance into my glass, and an even more generous one into his own.

"That is very curious," he remarked, eyeing the glass. "A murder, was it?"

"No. But a valuable document has disappeared. The most thorough search by the police cannot find it."

Touch him anywhere, and he flinched. M. Perley, for some extraordinary reason, appeared to think I was mocking him.

"A document, you say?" His laugh was a trifle unearthly. "Come, now. Was it by any chance—a letter?"

"No, no! It was a will. Three large sheets of parchment, of the size you call foolscap. Listen!"

And as M. Perley added water to his brandy and gulped down about a third of it, I leaned across the table.

"Madame Thevenet, of whom you may have heard me speak in this cafe, was an invalid. But, until the early hours of this morning, she was not bed-ridden. She could move, and walk about her room, and so on. She had been lured away from Paris and her family by a green-eyed woman called the Jezebel.

"But a kindly lawyer of this city, M. Duroc, believed that madame suffered and had a bad conscience about her own daughter. Last night, despite the Jezebel, he persuaded madame at last to sign a will leaving all her money to this daughter.

"And the daughter, Claudine, is in mortal need of it! From my brother and myself, who have more than enough, she will not accept a sou. Her affianced, Lieutenant Delage, is as poor as she. But, unless she leaves France for Switzerland, she will die. I will not conceal from you that Claudine suffers from that dread dis-

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ease we politely call consumption."

M. Perley stopped with his glass again half-way to his mouth.

He believed me now; I sensed it. Yet under the dark hair, tumbled on his forehead, his face had gone as white as his neat, mended shirt-frill.

"So very little a thing is money!" he whispered. "So very little a thing!"

And he lifted the glass and drained it.

"You do not think I am mocking you, sir?"

"No, no!" says M. Perley, shading his eyes with one hand. "I knew myself of one such case. She is dead. Pray continue."

"Last night, I repeat, Madame Thevenet changed her mind. When M. Duroc paid his weekly evening visit with the news that I should arrive to-day, madame fairly chattered with eagerness and a kind of terror. Death was approaching, she said; she had a presentiment."

As I spoke, Maurice, there returned to me the image of that shadowy, arsenic-green bedroom in the shuttered house; and what M. Duroc had told me.

"Madame," I continued, "cried out to M. Duroc that he must bolt the bedroom door. She feared the Jezebel, who lurked but said nothing. M. Duroc drew up to her bedside a portable writing-desk, with two good candles. For a long time madame spoke, pouring out contrition, self-abasement, the story of an unhappy marriage, all of which M. Duroc, sweating with embarrassment, was obliged to write down until it covered three large parchment sheets.

"But it was done, M. Perley!

"The will, in effect, left everything to her daughter, Claudine. It revoked a previous will by which all had been left—and this can be done in French law, as we both know—to Jezebel of the muddy complexion and the muddy yellow hair.

"Well, then! ...

"M. Duroc sallies out into the street, where he finds two sober fellows who come in. Madame signs the will, M. Duroc sands it, and the two men from the street affix their signatures as witnesses. Then *they* are gone. M. Duroc folds the will lengthways, and prepares to put it into his carpet-bag. Now, M. Perley, mark what follows!

"'No, no, no!' cries madame, with the shadow of her peaked nightcap wagging on the locked shutters beyond. 'I wish to keep it—for this one night!'

"'For this one night, madame?' asks M. Duroc.

"'I wish to press it against my heart,' says Madame Thevenet. 'I wish to read it once, twice, a thousand times! M. Duroc, what time is it?'

"Whereupon he takes out his gold repeater, and opens it. To

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his astonishment it is one o'clock in the morning. Yet he touches the spring of the repeater, and its pulse-beat rings one.

"'M. Duroc,' pleads Madame Thevenet, 'remain here with me for the rest of the night!'

"'Madame!' cries M. Duroc, shocked to the very fans of his beard. 'That would not be correct.'

"'Yes, you are right,' says madame. And never, swears the lawyer, has he seen her less bleary of eye, more alive with wit and cunning, more the great lady of ruin, than there in that green and shadowy and foul-smelling room.

"Yet this very fact puts her in more and more terror of the Jezebel, who is never seen. She points to M. Duroc's carpet-bag.

"'I think you have much work to do, dear sir?'

"M. Duroc groaned. 'The Good Lord knows that I have!'

"'Outside the only door of this room,' says madame, 'there is a small dressing-room. Set up your writing-desk beside the door there, so that no one may enter without your knowledge. Do your work there; you shall have a lamp or many candles. Do it,' shrieks madame, 'for the sake of Claudine and for the sake of an old friendship!'

"Very naturally, M. Duroc hesitated.

"'*She* will be hovering,' pleads Madame Thevenet, pressing the will against her breast. '*This* I shall read and read and read, and sanctify with my tears. If I find I am falling asleep,' and here the old lady looked cunning, 'I shall hide it. But no matter! Even *she* cannot penetrate through locked shutters and a guarded door.'

"Well, in fine, the lawyer at length yielded.

"He set up his writing-desk against the very doorpost outside the door. When he last saw madame, before closing the door, he saw her in profile with the green bed-curtains drawn except on that side, propped up with a tall candle burning on a table at her right hand.

"Ah, that night! I think I see M. Duroc at his writing-desk, as he has told me, in an airless dressing-room where no clock ticked. I see him, at times, removing his oval spectacles to press his smarting eyes. I see him returning to his legal papers, while his pen scratched through the wicked hours of the night.

"He heard nothing, or virtually nothing, until five o'clock in the morning. Then, which turned him cold and flabby, he heard a cry which he describes as being like that of a deaf-mute.

"The communicating door had not been bolted on Madame Thevenet's side, in case she needed help. M. Duroc rushed into the other room.

"On the table, at madame's

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right hand, the tall candle had burnt down to a flattish mass of wax over which still hovered a faint blueish flame. Madame herself lay rigid in her peaked nightcap. That revival of spirit last night, or remorse in her bitter heart, had brought on the last paralysis. Though M. Duroc tried to question her, she could move only her eyes.

"Then M. Duroc noticed that the will, which she had clutched as a doomed religious might clutch a crucifix, was not in her hand or on the bed.

"'Where is the will?' he shouted at her, as though she were deaf too. 'Where is the will?'

"Madame Thevenet's eyes fixed on him. Then they moved down, and looked steadily at a trumpery toy—a rabbit, perhaps four inches high, made of pink velours or the like—which lay on the bed. Again she looked at M. Duroc, as though to emphasize this. Then her eyes rolled, this time with dreadful effort, towards a large barometer, shaped like a warming-pan, which hung on the wall beside the door. Three times she did this before the blueish candle-flame flickered and went out."

And I, Armand de Lafayette, paused here in my recital to M. Perley.

Again I became aware that I was seated in a garish saloon, swilling brandy, amid loud talk that beat the air. There was a thumping noise from the theatre above our heads, and faint strains of music.

"The will," I said, "was not stolen. Not even the Jezebel could have melted through locked shutters or a guarded door. The will was not hidden, because no inch of the room remains unsearched. *Yet the will is gone!*"

I threw a glance across the table at M. Perley.

To me, I am sure, the brandy had given strength and steadied my nerves. With M. Perley I was not so sure. He was a little flushed. That slightly wild look, which I had observed before, had crept up especially into one eye, giving his whole face a somewhat lop-sided appearance. Yet all his self-confidence had returned. He gave me a little crooked smile.

I struck the table.

"Do you honour me with your attention, M. Perley?"

"What song the Syrens sang," he said to me, "or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, although puzzling questions, are not beyond *all* conjecture."

"They are beyond *my* conjecture!" I cried. "And so is this!"

M. Perley extended his hand, spread the fingers, and examined them as one who owns the universe.

"It is some little time," he remarked, "Since I have concerned myself with these trifles." His eyes

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retreated into a dream. "Yet I have given some trifling aid, in the past, to the Prefect of the Parisian police."

"You are a Frenchman! I knew it! And the police?" Seeing his lofty look, I added: "As any amateur, understood?"

"Understood!" Then his delicate hand—it would be unjust to call it claw-like—shot across the table and fastened on my arm. The strange eyes burned towards my face. "A little more detail!" he pleaded humbly. "A little more, I beg of you! This woman, for instance, you call the Jezebel?"

"It was she who met me at the house."

"And then?"

I described for him my meeting with the Jezebel, with M. Duroc, and our entrance to the sick-room, where the shaggy police-officer sat in the arm-chair and the saturnine doctor faced us from beside the bed.

"This woman," I exclaimed, with the room vividly before my eyes as I described it, "seems to have conceived for me—forgive me— a kind of passion. No doubt it was due to some idle compliments I once paid her at Paris.

"As I have explained, the Jezebel is *not* unattractive, even if she would only—again forgive me—wash her hair. Nevertheless, when once more she brushed my side and whispered, 'You don't really hate me, do you?' I felt little less than horror. It seemed to me that in some fashion I was responsible for the whole tragedy.

"While we stood beside the bed, M. Duroc the lawyer poured out the story I have recounted. There lay the poor paralytic, and confirmed it with her eyes. The toy rabbit, a detestable pink colour, lay in its same position on the bed. Behind me, hung against the wall by the door, was the large barometer.

"Apparently for my benefit, Madame Thevenet again went through her dumb-show with imploring eyes. She would look at the rabbit; next—as M. Duroc had not mentioned—she would roll her eyes all round her, for some desperate yet impenetrable reason, before fixing her gaze on the barometer.

"It meant ... what?

"The lawyer spoke then. 'More light!' gulped out M. Duroc. 'If you must have closed shutters and windows, then let us at least have more light!'

"The Jezebel glided out to fetch candles. During M. Duroc's explanation he had several times mentioned my name. At first mention of it the shaggy police-officer jumped and put away his clasp-knife. He beckoned to the physician, Dr. Harding, who went over for a whispered conference.

"Whereupon the police-officer sprang up.

"'Mr. Lafayette!' And he swung

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my hand pompously. 'If I'd known it was you, Mr. Lafayette, I wouldn't 'a' sat there like a bump on a log.'

"'You are an officer of police, sir,' said I. 'Can *you* think of no explanation?'

"He shook his head.

"'These people are Frenchies, Mr. Lafayette, and you're an American,' he said, with somewhat conspicuous lack of logic. 'If they're telling the truth—'

"'Let us assume that!'

"'I can't tell you where the old lady's will is,' he stated positively. 'But I can tell you where it ain't. It ain't hidden in this room!'

"'But surely—" I began in despair.

"At this moment the Jezebel, her brown-taffeta dress rustling, glided back into the room with a handful of candles and a tin box of the new-style Lucifer matches. She lighted several candles, sticking them on any surface in their own grease.

"There were one or two fine pieces of furniture; but the mottled-marble tops were chipped and stained, the gilt sides cracked. There were a few mirrors, creating mimic spectral life. I saw a little more clearly the faded green paper of the walls, and what I perceived to be the partly open door of a cupboard. The floor was of bare boards.

"All this while I was conscious of two pairs of eyes—the imploring gaze of Madame Thevenet and the amorous gaze of the Jezebel. One or the other I could have endured, but both together seemed to suffocate me.

"'Mr. Duroc here,' said the shaggy police-officer, clapping the distressed advocate on the shoulder, 'sent a messenger in a cab at half-past five this morning. And what time did we get here? I ask you and I tell you! Six o'clock!'

"Then he shook his finger at me, in a kind of pride and fury of efficiency.

"'Why, Mr. Lafayette, there's been fourteen men in this room from six this morning until just before you got here!'

"'To search for Madame Thevenet's will, you mean?'

"The shaggy man nodded portentously, and folded his arms.

"'Floor's solid.' He stamped on the bare boards. 'Walls and ceiling? Nary a inch missed. We reckon we're smart; and we are.'

"'But Madame Thevenet,' I persisted, 'was not a complete invalid until this morning. She could move about. If she became afraid of'—the name of the Jezebel choked me—'if she became afraid and *did* hide the will ...'

"'Where'd she hide it? Tell me?'

"'In the furniture, then?'

"'Cabinet-makers in, Mr. Lafayette. No secret compartments.'

"'In one of the mirrors?'

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"'Took the backs of 'em off. No will hid there.'

"'Up the chimney!' I cried.

"'Sent a chimney-sweep up there,' replied my companion in a ruminating way. Each time I guessed, he would leer at me in friendly and complacent challenge. 'Ye-es, I reckon we're pretty smart. But we didn't find no will.'

"The pink rabbit also seemed to leer from the bed. I saw madame's eyes. Once again, as a desperate mind will fasten on trifles, I observed the strings of the nightcap beneath her scrawny chin. But I looked again at the toy rabbit.

"'Has it occurred to you,' I said triumphantly, 'to examine the bed and bedstead of Madame Thevenet herself?'

"My shaggy friend went to her bedside.

"'Poor old woman,' he said. He spoke as though she were already a corpse. Then he turned round. 'We lifted her out, just as gentle as a new-born babe—didn't we ma'am? No hollow bedposts! Nothing in the canopy! Nothing in the frame or the feather-beds or the curtains or the bedclothes!'

"Suddenly the shaggy police-officer became angry, as though he wished to be rid of the whole matter.

"'And it ain't in the toy rabbit,' he said, 'because you can see we slit it up, if you look close. And it ain't in that barometer there. It just—ain't here.'

"There was a silence as heavy as the dusty, hot air of this room.

"'It is here,' murmured M. Duroc in his gruff voice. 'It must be here!'

"The Jezebel stood there meekly, with downcast eyes.

"And I, in my turn, confess that *I* lost my head. I stalked over to the barometer, and tapped it. Its needle, which already indicated, 'Rain; cold,' moved still further towards that point.

"I was not insane enough to hit it with my fist. But I crawled on the floor, in search of a secret hiding-place. I felt along the wall. The police-officer—who kept repeating that nobody must touch anything and he would take no responsibility until he went off duty at something o'clock—the police-officer I ignored.

"What at length gave me pause was the cupboard. already thoroughly searched. In the cupboard hung a few withered dresses and gowns, as though they had shrivelled with Madame Thevenet's body. But on the shelf of the cupboard . . .

"On the shelf stood a great number of perfume-bottles: even today, I fear, many of our countrymen think perfume a substitute for water and soap; and the state of madame's hands would have confirmed this. *But,* on the shelf, were a few dusty novels. There was a crumpled and begrimed

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copy of yesterday's New-York *Sun*. This newspaper did not contain a will, but it did contain a black beetle, which ran out across my hand.

"In a disgust past describing, I flung down the beetle and stamped on it. I closed the cupboard door, acknowledging defeat. Madame Thevenet's will had vanished. And at the same second, in that dim green room—still badly lighted, with only a few more candles—two voices cried out.

"One was my own voice:

"'*In God's name, where is it?*'

"The other was the deep voice of M. Duroc:

"'*Look at that woman! She knows!*'

"And he meant the Jezebel.

"M. Duroc, with his beard-fans a-tremble, was pointing to a mirror; a little blurred, as these mirrors were. Our Jezebel had been looking into the mirror, her back turned to us. Now she dodged, as at a stone thrown.

"With good poise our Jezebel writhed this movement into a curtsey, turning to face us. But not before I also had seen that smile—like a razor-cut before the blood comes—as well as full knowledge, mocking knowledge, shining out of wide-open eyes in the mirror.

"'You spoke to me, M. Duroc?' She murmured the reply, also in French.

"'Listen to me!' the lawyer said formally. 'This will is *not* missing. It is in this room. You were not here last night. Something has made you guess the truth. You know where it is.'

"'Are you unable to find it?' asked the Jezebel in surprise.

"'Stand back, young man!' M. Duroc said to me. 'I ask you something, mademoiselle, in the name of justice.'

"'Ask!' said the Jezebel.

"'If Claudine Thevenet inherits the money to which she is entitled, you will be well paid; yes, overpaid! You know Claudine. You know that!'

"'I know it.'

"'But if the new will be *not* found,' said M. Duroc, again waving me back, 'then you inherit everything. And Claudine will die. For it will be assumed—'

"'Yes!' said the Jezebel, with one hand pressed against her breast. 'You yourself, M. Duroc, testify that all night a candle was burning at madame's bedside. Well! The poor woman, whom *I* loved and cherished, repented of her ingratitude towards me. She burnt this new will at the candle-flame; she crushed its ashes to powder and blew them away!'

"'Is that true?' cried M. Duroc.

"'They will assume it,' smiled the Jezebel, 'as you say.' She looked at me. 'And for you, M. Armand!'

"She glided closer. I can only say that I saw her eyes uncovered;

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or, if you wish to put it so, her soul and flesh together.

"'I would give you everything on earth,' she said. 'But I will not give you the doll-face in Paris.'

"'Listen to me!' I said to her, so agitated that I seized her shoulders. 'You are out of your senses! You cannot give Claudine to me—she will marry another man!'

"'And do you think that matters to me,' asked the Jezebel, with her green eyes full on mine, 'as long as you still love her?'

"There was a small crash as someone dropped a knife on the floor.

"We three, I think, had completely forgotten that we were not alone. There were two spectators, although they did not comprehend our speech.

"The saturnine Dr. Harding now occupied the green armchair. His long thin legs, in tight black trousers with strap under the boot-instep, were crossed and looked spidery; his high beaver hat glimmered on his head. The police-officer, who was picking his teeth with a knife when I first saw him, had now dropped the knife when he tried to trim his nails.

"But both men sensed the atmosphere. Both were alert, feeling out with the tentacles of their nerves. The police-officer shouted at me.

"'What's this gabble?' he said. 'What's a-gitting into your head?'

"Grotesquely, it was that word 'head' which gave me my inspiration.

"'The nightcap!' I exclaimed in English.

"'What nightcap?'

"For the nightcap of Madame Thevenet had a peak; it was large; it was tightly tied under the chin; it might well conceal a flat-pressed document which—but you understand. The police-officer, dull-witted as he appeared, grasped the meaning in a flash. And how I wished I had never spoken! For the fellow meant well, but he was not gentle.

"As I raced round the curtained sides of the bed, the police-officer was holding a candle in one hand and tearing off madame's nightcap with the other. He found no will there, no document at all; only straggly wisps of hair on a skull grown ancient before its time.

"Madame Thevenet had been a great lady, once. It must have been the last humiliation. Two tears overflowed her eyes and ran down her cheeks. She lay propped up there in a nearly sitting position; but something seemed to wrench inside her.

"And she closed her eyes forever. And the Jezebel laughed.

"That is the end of my story. That is why I rushed out of the house like a madman. The will has vanished as though by magic;

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or is it still there by magic? In any case, you find me at this table—grubby and dishevelled and much ashamed."

For a little time after I had finished my narrative to M. Perley in the saloon, it seemed to me that the bar-counter was a trifle quieter. But a faint stamping continued from the theatre above our heads. Then all was hushed, until a chorus rose to a tinkle of many banjos.

Oh, I come from Alabama
With my banjo on my knee;
I depart for Louisiana . . .

Enough! The song soon died away, and M. Thaddeus Perley did not even hear it.

M. Perley sat looking downwards into an empty glass, so that I could not see his face.

"Sir," he remarked almost bitterly, "you are a man of good heart. I am glad to be of service in a problem so trifling as this."

"*Trifling!*"

His voice was a little husky, but not slurred. His hand turned the glass round and round.

"Will you permit two questions?" asked M. Perley.

"Two questions? Ten thousand!"

"More than two will be unnecessary." Still M. Perley did not look up. "This toy rabbit, of which so much was made: I would know its exact position on the bed?"

"It was almost at the foot of the bed, and about the middle in a crossways direction."

"Ah, so I had imagined. Were the three sheets of parchment, forming the will, written upon two sides or upon only one?"

"I had not told you, M. Perley. But M. Duroc said: upon one side only."

M. Perley raised his head.

His face was now flushed and distorted with drink, his eye grown wild. In his cups he was as proud as Satan, and as disdainful of others' intelligence; yet he spoke with dignity, and with careful clearness.

"It is ironic, M. de Lafayette, that I should tell you how to lay your hand on the missing will and the elusive money; since, upon my word, I have never been able to perform a like service for myself." And he smiled, as at some secret joke. "Perhaps," he added, "it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault."

I could only look at him in bewilderment.

"Perhaps the mystery is a little *too* plain! A little *too* self-evident!"

"You mock me, sir. I will not—"

"Take me as I am," said M. Perley, whacking the foot of the glass on the table, "or leave me. Besides"—here his wandering eye encountered a list of steam-sailings pasted against the wall—"I

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leave to-morrow by the *Parnassus* for England, and then for France."

"I meant no offence, M. Perley! If you have knowledge, speak!"

"Madame Thevenet," he said, carefully pouring himself more brandy, "hid the will in the middle of the night. Does it puzzle you that she took such precautions to hide the will? But the element of the *outre* must always betray itself. The Jezebel *must not* find that will! Yet Madame Thevenet trusted nobody—not even the worthy physician who attended her. If Madame were to die of a stroke, the police would be there and must soon, she was sure, discover her simple device. Even if she were paralyzed, it would ensure the presence of other persons in the room to act as unwitting guards.

"Your cardinal error," M. Perley continued dispassionately, "was one of ratiocination—rather, of inaccurate ratiocination. You tell me that Madame Thevenet, to give you a hint, looked fixedly at some point near the foot of the bed. Why do you assume that she was looking at the toy rabbit?"

"Because," I replied hotly, "the toy rabbit was the only object she could have looked at!"

"Pardon me, but it was *not*. You several times informed me that the bed-curtains were closely drawn together on three sides. They were drawn on all but the 'long' side towards the door. Therefore the ideal reasoner, without having seen the room, may safely say that the curtains were drawn together at the foot of the bed?"

"Yes, true!"

"After looking fixedly at this point represented by the toy, Madame Thevenet then 'rolls her eyes all round her'—in your phrase. May we assume that she wishes the curtains to be drawn back, so that she may see something *beyond* the bed!"

"It is—possible, yes!"

"It is more than possible, as I shall demonstrate. Let us direct our attention, briefly, to the incongruous phenomenon of the barometer on another wall. The barometer indicates, 'Rain; cold.'"

Here M. Perley's thin shoulders drew together under the old military cloak.

"Well," he said, "the cold is on its way. Yet this day, for April, has been warm outside and indoors, oppressively hot?"

"Yes! Of course!"

"You yourself," continued M. Perley, inspecting his finger-nails, "told me what was directly opposite the foot of the bed. Let us suppose that the bed-curtains are drawn open. Madame Thevenet, in her nearly seated position, is looking *downwards*. What would she have seen?"

"The fireplace!" I cried. "The grate of the fireplace!"

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"Already we have a link with the weather. And what, as you have specifically informed me, was in the grate of the fireplace?"

"An unlighted coal fire!"

"Exactly. And what is essential for the composition of such a fire? We need coal; we need kindling wood; but primarily and above all, we need—"

"*Paper!*" I cried.

"In the cupboard of that room," said M. Perley, with his disdainful little smile, "was a very crumpled and begrimed—mark that, not dusty—copy of *yesterday's* New-York *Sun*. To light fires is the most common, and indeed the best, use for our daily press. That copy had been used to build yesterday's fire. But something else, during the night, was substituted for it. You yourself remarked the extraordinarily dirty state of Madame Thevenet's hands."

M. Perley swallowed the brandy, and his flush deepened.

"Sir," he said loudly, "you will find the will crumpled up, with ends most obviously protruding under the coal and wood in the fireplace grate. Even had anyone taken the fire to pieces, he would have found only what appeared to be dirty blank paper, written side undermost, which could never be a valuable will. It was too self-evident to be seen.—Now go!"

"Go?" I echoed stupidly.

M. Perley rose from his chair.

"Go, I say!" he shouted, with an even wilder eye. "The Jezebel could not light that fire. It was too warm, for one thing; and all day there were police-officers with instructions that an outsider must touch nothing. But now? *Madame Thevenet kept warning you that the fire must not be lighted, or the will would be destroyed!*"

"Will you await me here?" I called over my shoulder.

"Yes, yes! And perhaps there will be peace for the wretched girl with—with the lung-trouble."

Even as I ran out of the door I saw him, grotesque and pitiful, slump across the table. Hope, rising and surging, seemed to sweep me along like the crack of the cabman's whip. But when I reached my destination, hope receded.

The shaggy police-officer was just descending the front steps.

"None of us coming back here, Mr. Lafayette!" he called cheerily. "Old Mrs. What's-her-name went and burnt that will at a candle last night. — Here, what's o'clock?"

The front door was unlocked. I raced through that dark house, and burst into the rear bedroom.

The corpse still lay in the big, gloomy bed. Every candle had flickered almost down to its socket. The police-officer's clasp-knife, forgotten since he had dropped it, still lay on the bare boards. But the Jezebel was there.

She knelt on the hearth, with

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the tin box of Lucifer matches she had brought there earlier. The match spurted, a blueish fire; I saw her eagerness; she held the match to the grate.

"A Lucifer," I said, "in the hand of a Jezebel!"

And I struck her away from the grate, so that she reeled against a chair and fell. Large coals, small coals rattled down in puffs of dust as I plunged my hands into the unlighted fire. Little sticks, sawed sticks; and I found it there—crumpled parchment-sheets, but incontestably madame's will.

"M. Duroc!" I called. "M. Duroc!"

You and I, my brother Maurice, have fought the Citizen-King with bayonets as we now fight the upstart Bonapartist; we need not be ashamed of tears. I confess, then, that the tears overran my eyes and blinded me. I scarcely saw M. Duroc as he hurried into the room.

Certainly I did not see the Jezebel stealthily pick up the police-officer's knife. I noticed nothing at all until she flew at me, and stabbed me in the back.

Peace, my brother: I have assured you all is well. At that time, faith, I was not much conscious of any hurt. I bade M. Duroc, who was trembling, to wrench out the knife; I borrowed his roomy greatcoat to hide the blood; I must hurry, hurry back to that little table under the gas-jet.

I planned it all on my way back. M. Perley, apparently a stranger in this country, disliked it and was evidently very poor even in France. But *we* are not precisely paupers. Even with his intense pride, he could not refuse —for such a service—a sum which would comfort him for the rest of his life.

Back I plunged into the saloon, and hurried down it. Then I stopped. The little round table by the pillar, under the flaring gas-jet, was empty.

How long I stood there I cannot tell. The back of my shirt, which at first had seemed full of blood, now stuck to the borrowed greatcoat. All of a sudden I caught sight of the fat-faced bartender with the gold teeth, who had been on service that afternoon and had returned now. As a mark of respect, he came out from behind the bar-counter to greet me.

"Where is the gentleman who was sitting at that table?"

I pointed to it. My voice, in truth, must have sounded so hoarse and strange that he mistook it for anger.

"Don't you worry about that, monseer!" said he reassuringly. "That's been tended to! We threw the drunken tramp out of here!"

"You threw—"

"Right bang in the gutter. Had to crawl along in it before he could stand up." My bartender's face was pleased and vicious. "Or-

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dered a bottle of best brandy, and couldn't pay for it." The face changed again. "Goddelmighty, monseer, what's wrong?"

"*I* ordered that brandy."

"*He* didn't say so, when the waiter brought me over. Just looked me up and down, crazy-like, and said a gentleman would give his I.O.U. Gentleman!"

"M. Perley," I said, restraining an impulse to kill that bartender, "is a friend of mine. He departs for France early to-morrow morning. Where is his hotel? Where can I find him?"

"Perley!" sneered my companion. "That ain't even his real name, I hearn tell. Gits high-and-mighty ideas from upper Broadway. But his real name's on the I.O.U."

A surge of hope, once more, almost blinded me. "Did you keep that I.O.U.?"

"Yes, I kepp it," growled the bartender, fishing in his pocket. "God knows why, but I kepp it."

And at last, Maurice, I triumphed!

True, I collapsed from my wound; and the fever would not let me remember that I must be at the dock when the *Parnassus* steam-packet departed from New-York next morning. I must remain here, shut up in a hotel-room and unable to sleep at night, until I can take ship for home. But where I failed, you can succeed. He was to leave on the morrow by the *Parnassus* for England, and then for France—so he told me. You can find him—in six months at the most. In six months, I give you my word, he will be out of misery forever!

"*I.O.U.,*" reads the little slip, "*for one bottle of your best brandy, forty-five cents. Signed: Edgar A. Poe.*"

I remain, Maurice,
Your affectionate brother,
Armand

EDITORIAL NOTE: Needless to tell you, now that you have finished *The Gentleman from Paris,* you have just read a brilliant tour de force—a double tour de force. Not only has John Dickson Carr devised a scintillating mystery—the "miracle" problem as distinguished from the "locked room"—but he has also challenged you to identify his detective character. The true identity of Thaddeus Perley is a magnificent "unexpected ending"—at least, we hope it was a thunderclap of surprise.

Those of you who deduced or guessed the identity of Thaddeus Perley know how lavishly Mr. Carr spread his clues throughout the story. But those of you who did not realize that Mr. Carr

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had a double trick up his sleeve may enjoy a recapitulation of the signs and symbols which identified Thaddeus Perley as the Father of the Detective Story, Edgar A. Poe himself.

First, there was the temporal clue: the story takes place in April 1849, exactly eight years after Poe wrote *The Murders in the Rue Morgue,* the world's first detective story, and a mere six months before he died.

Next, the portrait clue: Thaddeus Perley was described as a slight man of dark complexion, wearing a shabby coat of military cut; he had a dark mustache, wild and wandering eyes, and was "in his cups"—"not very steady on his feet." Surely this is a 'tec tintype of Edgar Allan Poe.

Next, the literary clue: Perley's reference to "what song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, although puzzling questions, are not beyond *all* conjecture." This is a quotation from Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn-Burial,* but infinitely more revealing, it is the epigraph which prefaces Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue.*

Next, the criminological clue: Perley's statement that he had given aid to the Prefect of the Parisian police—a reference, of course, to Monsieur G—— in *The Purloined Letter.*

Next, the psychological clue: Perley's comments on the insoluble mystery brought to him by the Marquis de Lafayette: "Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault"—"Perhaps the mystery is a little *too* plain! A little *too* self-evident!" These are the precise words which Dupin used to describe the supposedly insoluble mystery in *The Purloined Letter!*

Next, the creative clue: the missing will in *The Gentleman from Paris* is hidden in the very spirit of the missing document in *The Purloined Letter*—the perfect, the identical spirit! Indeed, as so often happens in this ingenious world of ours, the pupil has outdone the master: the hiding place of the will is even cleverer than the hiding place of the letter—no mean accomplishment by Mr. Carr, even with the advantages of more than a century of detective-story development.

And finally, the master clue—the name of the detective-character: it is an established fact that Poe often used assumed names, the best-known of which are Edgar A. Perry, Henri le Rennet, and Edward S. T. Grey. But on page 626, Volume II, of Hervey Allen's ISRAFEL: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe (New York: Doran, 1927), you will find a quotation from *Reminiscences*

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of Gabriel Harrison ("New York Times," March, 1899). In 1844 —five years before the events in Mr. Carr's story—Gabriel Harrison ran a tobacco and wine shop in lower Manhattan; he was also president of the "White Eagle Political Club." Poe once visited Harrison's store, asked for some tobacco, discovered that he had no money to pay for it, and was given the tobacco free by Harrison. Poe was so grateful for this kindness that he wrote a campaign song for the political club and presented it to Harrison, who recalled the incident as follows:

"I was delighted and wanted to pay him something for his trouble, but the only thing he would accept was a bag of my best coffee. As he was going I said I should like to know his name.

" 'Certainly,' he answered, with a faint smile, 'Thaddeus Perley, at your service.' "

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SPECIAL NOTE: *Our editorial staff thought this story too grim, and we really can't disagree. So if you do not care for stories that are too grim, simply skip the next four pages. But if your curiosity is aroused—well, you can't say we didn't warn you.*

Too grim, yes—but nevertheless a "thinking reader's" story . . .

THE SOOEY PILL

by ELAINE SLATER

IT WAS THE PILL SOCIETY. THERE was the morning-after pill, of course, which the government had made obligatory after the first child. Yet even so, the population growth was alarming, and overcrowding was becoming desperate. Then there were the multitudes of tranquilizer pills in almost every color, size, and shape that helped one to cope with the tensions caused by the almost total lack of privacy, by the constant noise, polluted air, continual abrasive physical contact with crowds, and by the harsh and ugly sights of a super-industrialization devoid of trees or greenery of any kind.

Then there were the food pills. One took them three times a day. The endless wheatfields, pastures, grazing lands, and vegetable farms of former days had become ancient history. Even the Grand Canyon was now filled to overflowing with sweating humanity, jostling endlessly for living space. The food pills were processed in huge floating factories, and consisted of compressed algae and seaweed, and plancton. They had a sort of unpleasant fishy taste, but could be swallowed whole with a glass of desalinated water, and they provided all the nutriments necessary to go on living.

But the most important pill of all was affectionately called the Sooey pill. It was the only one that came in a lavender color with a stamp on it resembling a clenched fist. Every person was issued one of these on his or her twenty-first birthday. If one lost the Sooey, another would be issued—but only after much red tape; and, of course, one's name was permanently placed on a "suspects list," to be consulted every time someone was murdered by misuse of a Sooey. These suspects automatically came under police surveillance and were questioned at great length, and one knew one-

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self to be at best a possible unwitting accessory to murder. For this reason, and others, people took great care not to lose their Sooeys.

Basically the entire society was built around the Sooey pill. It was not only the individual's escape hatch, but Society depended on it as a regulator in a world where Nature's own regulators seemed to have fused out, or gone haywire. There had been much talk—and the Radical Demopubs had actually tried to force through a Bill to issue the Sooey pill at age thirteen or younger—of issuing the pill before childbearing age. It was a desperate measure, attempting to deal with a desperate situation. But the Demopubs were overruled by the conservative wing of their own party, who joined with the opposition in saying that it was an inhuman solution, and that the situation was not yet *that* desperate—an indication some people muttered, in itself, of things to come.

But perhaps it would not become necessary ever to pass that Bill, as living conditions were indeed fast becoming so intolerable that the Sooey, or suicide pill, was being used with ever-increasing frequency. People rarely reached forty before using it, and then desisted only because of an excessive love for their child and a desire, more sentimental than reasoned, to help the child reach adulthood. Parents who felt less responsible or loving were using the Sooey in greater and greater numbers—in their thirties, when the child was likely to be a teen-ager, or even younger. This was a great help to the government despite the large number of orphans.

But the government did not of course sanction murder as a solution, as this would have opened the gates to total chaos and anarchy. Therefore, when thirteen-year-old Billy Overton was found dead of Sooey poisoning, the Police went to work as they always did—to seek the perpetrator of this heinous deed. The boy had been a happy, healthy, loving child, and his parents were beside themselves with grief.

The "Suspects List" was immediately consulted and the computers were put to work. It came up with only three names—all people who had lost their Sooey, of course, and who, in addition, had somehow been near the scene of the crime or had known the murdered boy. All three seemed most unlikely suspects, but the Police were determined to track down every clue.

One was a taxi driver, who had lost his Sooey some eight weeks ago, and whose only connection with Billy was that he had dropped off a passenger three blocks from the Overtons' apartment an hour or so before the crime was committed. As it would have taken him about that long to drive to the Overtons', he became a prime sus-

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pect. But the fact remained that he insisted he had never laid eyes on Billy Overton, and all objective evidence seemed to bear out his contention. And what possible motive could he have?

The second suspect turned up by the computer was a woman who lived within walking distance of the Overtons, had lost her Sooey pill three months before, and was just about to have a new one reissued. She knew the Overtons vaguely, but never remembered having met Billy, although she may have passed him many times on the busy, frantically crowded streets; and surely, she said, she had no wish to kill the young boy. She was married but as yet had no child of her own. And what possible motive could she have? She was known to be a quiet almost apathetic type.

The third suspect seemed even more remote than the other two. The computer turned up the name of Bobby's First Grade teacher who had lost her Sooey three days previous to the murder; but she now lived 300 miles away, and since any type of transport had to be reserved months in advance, she couldn't possibly have been at the scene of the murder even in the highly unlikely situation that she had somehow conceived a hatred for Billy in First Grade and, harboring this dislike, had resolved seven years later to kill him! It was utter nonsense and the Police knew it. But Billy was dead and someone had killed him.

Inspector Fenner was nearing 42 and only his deep attachment to his sixteen-year-old daughter kept him from using his own Sooey. His wife had used hers the year before, after writing him a heartbreaking farewell note begging forgiveness for leaving him to bring up their Hannah; but she could bear the stifling tension no longer. Inspector Fenner had held her in his arms as she gratefully breathed her last, so he knew the suffering of the bereaved.

He now regarded the Overtons with great compassion. Billy's father, while obviously grief-stricken, was trying to console his wife, but she was beyond consolation. Her eyes were red-rimmed, swollen, with dark black circles underneath. She sobbed continually in great gasping tearless sobs.

"Billy is better off, my darling," her husband told her. "You know that. How often have we spoken of the horrors of this world, of the horrors that awaited him, that more and more were enveloping our Billy as he grew older and came to realize what the world is like. You, who never wanted him to stop smiling. You, who protected him and built an imaginary world around him—you must know and be grateful that he is released now from the ghastly, gray, grim unrelieved life that we live."

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Inspector Fenner could bear no more. He left. But the call to duty was too strong, too deeply ingrained in him. He returned the next day and in the gentlest of voices asked the Overtons to show him their Sooey pills.

"What!" said Billy's father, in anger. He was afraid the police officer wanted to take them away. Reassured, he brought forth his precious little lavender pill with the clenched fist stamped on it. Mrs. Overton just stood staring at the Inspector.

Three months later, after the trial of Mrs. Overton, the Inspector leaned over his sleeping Hannah, sleeping among hundreds of others in the unmarried women's dormitory of their apartment complex, and kissed her goodbye. That night he gratefully used his own Sooey pill, unable to bear the reverberating screams that kept resounding in his ears—screams that he had heard that afternoon—screams of Mrs. Overton after the sentencing.

Until his last breath he heard her shrieking dementedly to the Court, "Have mercy! Have mercy! I did it to save him. I loved him so dearly! Don't make me live! For God's sake, don't make me live!"

But the Court refused to reissue her Sooey.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: The current theatrical season depends—as have most recent seasons—heavily, sometimes heavy-handedly, on adaptations of books or the "musicalization" of well-known plays. At times it seems as though *nothing* is too improbable or absurd to be presented in this way; and it was really to burlesque this habit that I started this very odd project. Strangely enough, what began as a jape now seems more and more plausible. Thanks to the enthusiasm of EQMM's Managing Editor, Clayton Rawson (who has demonic ideas about the staging and special effects), a tenuous reality begins to invest the enterprise, with composers, producers, and agents being talked to (or at least nodded to amiably)—and, who knows? Some readers may yet find themselves in an actual theater, waiting (with perhaps mixed feelings) for the curtain to rise on

ACT I, SCENE 1 OF

THE FU MANCHUSICAL

by D. R. BENSEN

(*The Overture, to those fond of comparing, echoes equally Gilbert & Sullivan and* The Threepenny Opera. *As it concludes, the curtain rises to reveal a Mayfair drawing room, thronged with ladies and gentlemen elegantly got up in the styles of the 1920's; a notably tall* BUTLER *circulates among them with a tray of drinks. At center stage we find* DR. PETRIE *answering casual questions: "I say, Petrie, isn't your friend Nayland Smith to be here tonight?" "Yes, I gather he is." "Strange parts of the world Smith gets into." "East of Suez, where the best is like the worst, eh?" A small clump of people around* PETRIE *works this up into a song.*)

CLUMP:
Sir Denis Nayland Smith is back from Burma
Or Egypt, Ifni, Africa, or Smyrna;
He's seen the distant East in all its glories,
And sure as life he'll bore us with his stories.

He's swum the Nile and half the Brahma-Putra;
He knows the man who wrote the Kama Sutra.
Dacoits and Thugs to him are scarce a menace—
He treats them coolly as a game of tennis.

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Tibet and Egypt know his fabled presence;
Their pheasants fear his gun (as do their peasants).
On plain, in jungle, helmeted in pith,
You can't avoid—

BUTLER (*at the door*): Sir Denis Nayland Smith.

(NAYLAND SMITH *enters, dressed as are the other men—dinner jacket, black tie, and wing collar; but he is carrying a slender bamboo cane which he flourishes as he lopes to meet* PETRIE. *They exchange affectionate greetings.*)

PETRIE: But, Smith, the cane—are you favoring an injury?

NAYLAND SMITH: No, no, Petrie: I am—as yet—whole. (*He raps the cane with his knuckles.*) For one who has chosen to pit himself against the power of that archfiend, Dr. Fu Manchu, it is well to be equipped with a whippy stick, and the whippier the better. (*He lashes it about, much as the tiger does its tail.*)

PETRIE: A sticky wicket?

NAYLAND SMITH: No, a whippy sticket. The playmates of Fu Manchu are sinister and unexpected, and I go constantly armed against them. Let me tell you, as I crossed the Park minutes ago, on my way here, I was closely followed by a most curious wasp, and managed to drive the creature off only by the nimblest of work with this very stick.

PETRIE: But surely, Smith, on a warm spring day in the Park a wasp is not uncommon?

NAYLAND SMITH: Blood-red, hairy, the size of a pigeon? No, no, Petrie, this was none of your common paper wasps; I fancy I can tell Fu Manchu's handiwork when I see it. Thank you (*to the* BUTLER, *as he takes a glass from the tray*). You would scarcely credit, Petrie, how far and how deep that evil genius' power extends. I have seen its traces in the docks of Limehouse and the cabarets of Berlin, in the crumbling alleys of Baghdad and in the mists of the Brahma-Putra—did you know I swam halfway across it, once?—on Himalayan crags and in American speakeasies—a hundred places, and all of them points in the world-wide web that centers on that unbelievable giant of crime!

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PETRIE: You have taken an interest in the affairs of Fu Manchu, then?

NAYLAND SMITH (*regards him fixedly a moment*): I have, indeed, as I—Bah! Our host's cellar has fallen off shockingly, Petrie. This sherry has a positive smell of bitter almonds. (*Sets glass down.*)

PETRIE: But, Smith, I know scarcely anything of Fu Manchu. Who, or what, is he?

(NAYLAND SMITH sings:)
Insidious,
Perfidious,
Implacable and hideous:
The Devil-Doctor feared by all mankind.

For knavery
And slavery,
And a nasty kind of bravery
His equal is impossible to find.

Ferocity!
Atrocity!
If there's evil done, he'll boss it—he
Commands the world of crime's most hellish crew.

His ambuscades
And deadly raids
Inspire a fear that never fades;
There's no escaping frightful Fu Manchu!

Picture a person tall and feline,
Powerful, skeleton-lean;
A brow like Shakespeare, a face like Satan;
Eyes of the true cat-green.
Add to all this a positive giant's
Intellect and command of science,
And there you have the most incredible criminal genius
the world has ever seen!

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But no one knows
The shape he shows;
He'll change his height, walk, weight, and nose—
The fiend's a perfect master of disguise!
The only clue
To follow through
Is this I now pass on to you:
He can't conceal his haunting, cat-green eyes!

So don't hunt a sinister oriental
Sporting a Mandarin's queue.
If you see such a person it's virtually certain
It cannot be Fu Manchu.
Look for him rather concealed behind
A mask that hides that sinister mind:
Policeman, podiatrist, charwoman, lawyer—he may be here
disguised as me or *you!*

(*As he finishes, he turns to face the* BUTLER.)

BUTLER: Dinner is served.

(*Guests,* PETRIE, *and* NAYLAND SMITH *exit, leaving the* BUTLER. *As he pads about the room gathering glasses and cleaning tables, the stage lights dim. He straightens and turns to face the audience . . . and in the gloom his eyes glow a sinister and luminous* GREEN.)

CURTAIN

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a *NEW* short story by

ANTHONY GILBERT

One of Anthony Gilbert's finest short stories—beautifully strange and strangely beautiful. It will keep you enthralled and puzzled and uneasy from paragraph to paragraph—but we will say no more . . .

THE QUIET MAN

by ANTHONY GILBERT

MISS NORA MARCH WAS WALKing down Barton Street toward the pharmacist on the corner when she saw the man and the little boy.

"I knew they were foreigners at once," she said later. "Even before I heard him speak."

The man was small and thin —frail-looking was her inward expression—and wore a cheapish thinnish black coat, too thin for this snowy morning, and a round black hat that made him look like someone from an outdated TV film. The little boy was more warmly dressed, a remarkable-looking child, pale—too pale, she thought—but well-nourished, with dark lashes raying out on his cheeks and great dark serious eyes. The man turned to intercept the driver of a haughty white car that had just drawn up at the curb, but the driver was one of those people who has no time for strangers. The foreign man turned and caught Miss March's eye. She was in her own way quite an imposing figure, ample, beaming, clad in a blue cloak and long pointed lace-up shoes. She believed that we pass through this world but once and should therefore lose no opportunity of doing even the most infinitesimal good.

"Can I help you?" she called to the quiet-seeming man. Holding the child's hand closely in one of his, the stranger extended a slip of paper, across the top of which was a printed address. Dr. Anderson and Dr. Pike.

"Why, they're —" Nora began.

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The man interrupted her, not rudely, but as if this were what he had anticipated.

"The doctor gave it to me," he explained.

His English was quite good but his accent was unmistakable. Mid-European, thought Miss March. She saw that under the printed words someone had drawn a diagram that would have foxed someone far more lively than the stranger. It looked like a maze with no exits, simply stars and lines radiating out from it. Scrawled against this design was a single word—Undertaker. She paled, like most healthy people confronted suddenly with death. She knew now what the quiet man wanted.

The last of the tall Victorian houses on the other side of the street belonged to Mr. Thurlow, who still called himself a Funeral Upholder. It had always surprised residents that the Council permitted a business, and what a dolorous business no matter how respectable, to be carried on from what was actually a private residence. Not that Mr. Thurlow was n't the height of discretion. A lifesize drawing of a bishop's mitre hung in one window, a silent testimony to the aristocracy of his clients, and the only thing that distinguished him from his neighbors was a small board carrying his name and the words "Funeral Upholder," swinging above the porch.

The hearse that constantly stood in front of the house was more like a plain van than a hearse, and was used, not for collecting customers, but for conveying coffins in the most delicate manner conceivable to their destination. Miss March remembered vaguely as a quite young child seeing the original Mr. Thurlow, a magnificent old gentleman in a wide-brimmed hat, a black morning coat, and a long white beard, doing the honors, as it were, to the mourners.

"That is the place," said Nora a bit awkwardly, and stood for a moment watching the man look carefully up and down the road for approaching traffic; then, holding the child's hand more tightly than before, he crossed the street and walked through the darkness that the ever-open door revealed. For some reason Nora felt quite shaken.

"Dear me, I hope you're not sickening for the 'flu, Miss March," said Mr. Burroughs, the pharmacist, who knew her well and for whose shop she had been bound when she encountered the strangers. "There's a lot of it about, you know."

She shook her head. "No, no. But I had a bit of a shock." She told them all—there was a girl assistant and a silent man sitting in the shop's one chair waiting for a prescription—about the foreigner and the little boy.

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"It must be on his wife's account that he's gone to see Mr. Thurlow," she explained. "Otherwise he would have left the child behind with her. It's no place for a little boy. Even if he didn't know what it was all about when he started—well, there are the funeral furnishings."

Mr. Thurlow's office was hung with photographs of various kinds of coffins; he even had a small model on his desk, and there were sample pieces of granite and marble, since he also had an interest in a stone-mason's business which did very nice work erecting crosses, figures of angels, and slabs, both upright and prone. They looked well enough in a churchyard, but—he's an intelligent child, reflected Nora March; how can he help not thinking of his mother being "planted" under one of those? She recalled her own mother's death when she herself was twelve years old, and had supposed these heavy stones were put over a grave to prevent the occupant from escaping.

"You'd think there'd be a neighbor," said the girl assistant.

The seated man remarked, "When a child has lost one parent he is more likely to cling all the closer to the one who remains. Children need security and in a small child security resides in his parents."

He had been sitting there for several minutes without addressing a word to anyone, and now they looked at him in surprise as though astonished to find that he had the power of speech.

"I could have brought him in here with me," said Miss March. "I could have distracted him somehow." Her glance fell on a basketful of yellow soap Teddy Bears, left over from Christmas. "They might have amused him," she added.

"A child who has just lost his mother might not find a soap animal much of a substitute," said the unpleasant man.

Miss March, carrying on as though she hadn't heard him, continued, "They probably don't know many people hereabouts. He's a foreigner,"—she said this in the confident voice of one to whom any man not the possessor of a British passport is a foreigner—"who didn't know where to find Mr. Thurlow's establishment."

If she had thought to silence the anonymous customer she was wrong. "Unless the fellow's a modern Bluebeard, who's had plenty of experience in disposing of wives, there's no reason why he should know where Mr. Thurlow hangs out," he remarked.

"Dr. Anderson recommended him," Miss March went on fluently, addressing herself to Mr. Burroughs. No other customers came in, which was probably as well.

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"Didn't die in the hospital, then," said the pharmacist. "They always send people to Edgerton's. Not that he does any better job, only the extras come to a lot more."

"This one hardly looks as if he could afford even the most inexpensive funeral," Miss March said, and was brought up short by the girl assistant, who had stationed herself by the door. "Oh, look, something's happened. Oh, the poor little chap!"

Miss March turned and stiffened. The quiet man was coming away from Mr. Thurlow's, but this time he was carrying the little boy, whose head lolled heavily against his father's shoulder. The man crossed the street and pushed open the door of the pharmacy.

"What happened?" breathed Miss March. "Did he faint?"

"It was the shock," said the little man, looking faint himself. "It was perhaps a mistake to bring him with me, but what could I do?"

He looked round bewilderedly. The anonymous man rose from the single chair and helped the father to settle the little boy in it. "He's very pale," the anonymous man suggested.

"Mr. Thurlow said there is something—sal-vol-lat-till?"

"Sal volatile," exclaimed Miss March. "Do they still use that? It's what Noah used to bring Mrs. Noah round when they looked out of the windows of the Ark and saw the water subsiding."

"The life and soul of the party," commented the anonymous man, and poor Nora felt herself become scarlet. She was accustomed to jollying along people in trouble, a habit that tended to blunt the edges of delicacy. But her heart was as large as Piccadilly Circus.

Mr. Burroughs, who had gone into the dispensary, now came back with a remedy of his own.

"Nothing to worry about, sir," he said. "It could be Nature's way, if he's been under strain. It's a rest really—"

"It was so sudden," the father explained. "After so much and no yielding, and then, one little cry. It was like a light going out."

The door burst open again and Mr. Thurlow himself came in, solid, responsible, dependable—what's called a substantial man.

"How is the little chap?" he asked. "You know, Mr. Koenig, it might be a good idea to get him along to the hospital, just for a checkup. Children are very sensitive, and anyone can see this one's intelligent. No need to alarm the little fellow with an ambulance. Mr. Burroughs will get you a taxi, won't you, Burroughs?"

But the father instantly took alarm. "No, sir, there have been too many strangers, and already he is in a strange land."

"But where do you propose to

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take him? You have a house?"

"We have no house, just some rooms we rent. But the landlady will not let us return. She says —" He paused, passing his hands over his pale brow.

"She doesn't sound human," said Miss March.

"He can't come back to my place," said Mr. Thurlow. "It would be different if we used the basement as a residence, but I keep my professional stuff there."

Coffins, thought Miss March, fascinated. Cerecloths, shrouds, embalming fluid. It was years since she had had any responsibility for helping to arrange a funeral—that had been dear old Da and a real hellfire-and-brimstoner he had been, a pillar of the local chapel; a lot of people had expected the whole building to collapse when he went, but perhaps the Almighty thought the occasion was worth a miracle, because the chapel continued to function without him.

Nora came back from memories of that alarming old man to the present and the strange group in the shop—the collapsed child, the distraught father, the attentive pharmacist, the assistant, the nameless man who seemed to have forgotten all about his prescription, and now Mr. Thurlow whose gaze rested on the child.

"How beautiful he is!" Miss March exclaimed on impulse. "Does he take after his mother?"

The next instant she recognized the appallingness of what she had said, but before she could break into awkward apologies the door swung open again. Mr. Burroughs looked instantly relieved. Here at last was someone who could be expected to take charge.

"Why, Dr. Barron, just the man we want. We have a bit of trouble."

The doctor, a vigorous man of about 40, took in the situation at a glance. "What happened to the boy?" he demanded. "Shock? Why? Are you the father? You look ready to faint yourself, and I prefer my patients one at a time. Here, Burroughs, haven't you got any more chairs?"

The girl assistant hurried to get one, and the doctor pushed the pale little man into it.

"It must have been the photographs," acknowledged Mr. Thurlow.

"What are you doing here?" inquired the doctor rudely. "Trying to drum up a bit of business?"

"Mr. Koenig came to see me about his wife's interment." The undertaker spoke with an unexpected delicacy.

"Bringing the child? I take it you had no choice?"

"No, sir. He could not remain in that house with that woman."

"I think he means the landlady," interposed Nora March.

"Which house are you talking about?" the doctor asked.

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"It does not matter now, we cannot return. The landlady told me this morning. 'This is a respectable house,' she said."

"Dying's perfectly respectable—it's something we shall all come to," retorted Dr. Barron robustly. "Does the lady suppose she's immortal?"

"It was the police, you see," Mr. Koenig explained. "She had never had the police on her premises before. She has a reputation, she said." His voice wavered. If he had been pale earlier, he now seemed ashen.

"Haven't you got a drop of brandy on the premises?" the doctor demanded of the pharmacist. "Now then, sir, try and pull yourself together. You say your wife's dead. I suppose you had a doctor for her?"

"Dr. Anderson. She sent me to Mr. Thurlow."

"And she attended Mrs. Koenig?"

"No, sir. It was not like that."

A new suspicion flashed through the doctor's mind. "She didn't do herself an injury?"

"No, sir."

"Then—the police?"

"They were there when I came in."

"This was—when?"

"Yesterday. I was coming to tell my wife I would be working late—I have this small position, you understand; it is only until we can join my brother in the United States of America, and if Mr. Danky wishes me to work late, then I am happy to oblige."

Miss March's big heart swelled as it always did when she heard of tyranny. She didn't know who Danky was but she was sure he was someone who would readily take advantage of a foreigner.

"And you went—in your lunch hour?—to tell your wife?"

"In Hungary where I come from if a man is late from his work his wife knows she may not see him again."

"Good God!" said the doctor.

"I had some flowers—Lauri loved flowers. It was lonely for her," he explained. "I was out at my work, the boy was at school—it was not always safe in Hungary, but there were neighbors, and my poor Lauri, she did not speak the language so good—so well. Wait till we are in America, I would say to her; my brother has a big house, he escaped during the Revolution in 1956, we were less fortunate—but we wait and we wait, and presently I hear, my brother has a friend in England, he will pull strings—that is what you say?—and from England we can sail to America."

"You mean, you're immigrants?"

"No, sir. We have passports, papers, everything in order. Very correct. But it takes time, the money, the permissions, the arrangements, and then we must

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find a ship. But it is only a little more time, I say, be patient."

"And she wasn't?"

"She was young and beautiful—you understand?"

The doctor wasn't sure he did, but he said, "I read you, though you still haven't explained about the police. There was an accident. Why didn't the landlady phone the hospital?"

It was in the doctor's mind that the wretched woman might have lost her head and cut a vein or taken an overdose. Like Miss March he didn't think mid-Europeans capable of the control and phlegm of the British. "By the way, how long has this boy been out?"

"Out? He came with me."

"I don't mean that."

"It's only been a few minutes, Doctor," Mr. Thurlow put in. "I daresay it was seeing the coffins. We don't expect to get children, not that most of them aren't tough enough. But you never saw anything like it—he just went down like a stone."

"Did he hit his head or anything?"

"No. No, I don't think so. Just passed out."

"It was the shock," the father explained with a naive simplicity that horrified them all. "You see he saw the man."

"The man?"

"A man, any man, he does not know who."

The doctor, feeling as though he were treading on eggs, said carefully, "He saw a man—you mean, with your wife?"

"No one knew my son was in the house, he has his dinner at school, but yesterday morning he was sick, perhaps it was something he ate, so his teacher sent him home. When he came back the landlady was out, but he is very reliant, he has a key, he could hear his mother speaking, so he went up to his room. He has his own room at the top of the house, a room all to himself."

"And?" prompted the doctor.

"How could anyone guess?"

"I'm not too good at guessing myself," the doctor agreed, feeling that this conversation had gone on for about an hour, and he still didn't know how the foreign woman had died. "Who was this man?"

"No one knows. The police—they question the boy and question him. What was the man like? Had you ever seen him before? Was he tall, short, thin, stout? As if a child could tell them anything from that one glance. It was a man, he said; what more could he say? Have mercy, I begged them, he is only a child. But they said, He is our only witness. Now, Sonny—Sonny?"

"A British expression for the young, intended to be reassuring," the doctor said. "Are you telling

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us the boy saw his mother *attacked?*"

The same hideous word was slipping into all their minds, but it was the anonymous man who asked, "Is this a case of murder?"

"I don't like it," said the girl assistant suddenly. They had almost forgotten about her.

"Then go and ring up the hospital and say I want an ambulance," retorted the doctor bruskly. "Now, sir, this is very painful, I know—but for the boy's sake we must get the situation clear. Just what did he see?"

"He saw a man—and his mother on the floor where she had fallen. How should he notice what the man was like? He ran to his mother, she did not speak—this is what he told us, you understand—he became afraid, he cried out, someone came in—"

"I thought you said the house was empty."

"Perhaps he had left the door open. Then the landlady appeared, she called the police, they were there when I arrived, and the people round the gate, talking and pointing. That window, they said. And the police were questioning Rudi. You say you heard them speaking; did you recognize the man's voice? Did you hear her call him a name? Think before you answer. As if a child could tell them."

"And you have no suspicions yourself?"

"I am out all day, my wife is lonely, perhaps she makes friends—"

"Chaps you don't know?"

"Perhaps. The landlady, she said to the police that it was no one special; she spoke as though my wife—but then she is old, ugly, a Miss, she is jealous."

"Okay, okay," said the doctor. "What it amounts to is the landlady couldn't suggest anyone either."

"Sir," Mr. Koenig pleaded, "they will not believe all she says?—the police, I mean. I am not used to having this sort of woman in my house, she said." Suddenly his voice had changed in a manner that startled them. Now it was the long-toothed envious landlady trying to disgrace a young woman with beauty and charm, qualities the landlady had never possessed.

The doctor said testily, "Did that girl of yours phone for the ambulance?"

"Yes, Doctor," said the girl pertly. "They haven't had time to get here yet."

"Building one perhaps," the doctor said. He was thinking how rum it was that the little colorless chaps so often picked the winners. Hard to blame a spirited young woman, left on her own all day, if she developed a roving glance. There was a name for them—*femmes fatales*—the trouble was that the fatal bit hap-

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ened only too often to the woman themselves. Fidelity might be boring virtue, but it made for ecurity. He wondered how much he boy had really seen. It was good thing they were going verseas—new surroundings, a ew family, might help to blot ut the horror.

"Take care," said Miss March uddenly. "He's coming round."

At the same moment there was he sound of bells from the street nd the ambulance swept up and ound the corner, to stop at the harmacist's side door where it wouldn't obstruct the traffic.

"Sir, you will not take him way?" Mr. Koenig was instantly agitated.

"Now, use your head," the doctor urged. "You've nowhere to ake him—where's your luggage, y the way?"

"One bag I have left at the tation. I have promised the landady to call for the rest."

"Where are you proposing to pend the night?"

"Perhaps I could get into a ostel."

"You certainly can't take the oy there. He'll be much better ff with us. Think what the next ew days are going to be like. There's going to be an inquest. He can't attend that!"

"You do not think the police—"

"Stuff and nonsense!" said the nonymous man suddenly. "A boy of that age couldn't give evidence that any responsible jury would accept. You can make a child of that age say almost anything, if you persist long enough and frighten him enough."

"You don't do the police justice," exclaimed Miss March, pink with indignation. "They're not brutes. They have a very difficult job." She never believed they got their full credit from the public, who treated them as if they were another branch of the Health Service.

"They'll get their reward in heaven," said the doctor callously. "It's not only the police, though I can't promise, even in the hospital, to bar them. It would take the Lord Himself to do that, and He'd have His work cut out. But there's the public, the press, the photographers, the sightseers, all the nosey Parkers; no, you let us have him for a few days, and you'll have free access, I promise you. And see if you can't hurry up that journey to America. What made you go to the doctor?" he added.

"It was the boy, he was acting so strange. And then—I needed some advice, and we are still strangers—she told me to see Mr. Thurlow. I could not leave Lauri in that place."

His hearers presumed he meant the morgue. It was unthinkable that the landlady would have allowed the body to remain on her

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premises, even if the police had agreed.

"We'll look after all that for you," said Thurlow, looking slightly embarrassed.

The ambulance men came in, looking about them curiously. "This the passenger?" they asked, seeming to find it difficult to distinguish between the rival claims of the boy and his father. Rudi had recovered sufficiently to sit up and take stock of his surroundings.

"Papa!"

"Yes, Rudi. There is nothing to fear. This gentleman is a doctor—he will take you to the hospital, just for a little—"

"The hospital?" The child shrank back, as though he equated a hospital with a concentration camp. But surely he was too young for that expression to have any meaning for him.

"They will care for you while Papa is so busy—it will only be for a short time."

"You will come back, Papa? You will come back?"

"Of course he'll come back," said the doctor. "He's got to make arrangements about going to America, you know. You hadn't forgotten that you are going to America?"

"No. But Mama—"

"Not Mama. You know that, don't you?"

"The police—" the child began, his eyes imploring.

"He will not allow the police to ask you any more questions," promised Mr. Koenig. "Now, Rudi, you will be a good boy—remember that nothing can happen to harm a good child." The anonymous man—who perhaps remembered the ovens at Auschwitz, snorted audibly, then skillfully, if a few seconds late, turned the sound into a tremendous trumpeting into his handkerchief. "Evil does not happen to the good," the father pleaded. He seemed half desperate, almost as if he didn't know what he was saying—and no wonder, thought Miss March.

The ambulance drivers waited a bit impatiently; there would be other calls, other accidents.

"Papa," said the little boy, and his eyes were wide, the lashes raying out on his pale cheeks. "Mama was not wicked, was she?"

"Of course not. Rudi, that is a thing you must never say."

"Then, Papa," the child whispered, "if she was not wicked, why did you kill her?"

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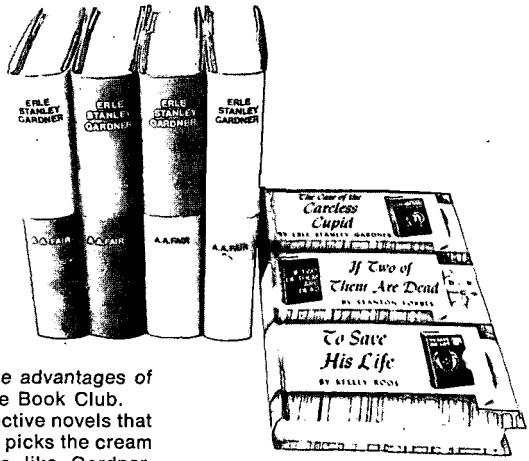

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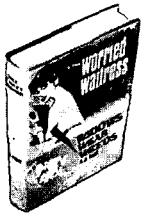

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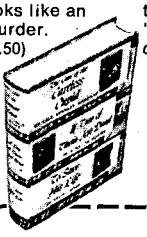

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